

SANE *journal*

sequential art narrative in education



Issue 1:1
"Comics in
the Contact Zone"

**Namor and Human Torch are properties of
Marvel.**

1-1-2010

Introduction: Context and Content (The Contact Zone in Historical Curricular Context and Relation to Contemporary Literacies)

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Carter, James Bucky Ph.D. (2010) "Introduction: Context and Content (The Contact Zone in Historical Curricular Context and Relation to Contemporary Literacies)," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 1.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol1/iss1/1>

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**Context: The Contact Zone in Historical Curricular Context and Relation to
Contemporary Literacies**

By James Bucky Carter

Mary Louise Pratt defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” and where those involved in the educational experience may “reconsider the models of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing and that are under challenge today” (Pratt 2002, p.4). I fully believe that almost every aspect of contemporary schooling constitutes such spaces and that exploring them is one of the most important things teachers can do, for themselves and for their students.

This inaugural issue of *SANE journal* is about contact zones, specifically how teachers and students at various levels can and do engage with contact zones when it comes to teaching comics and graphic novels, which, despite growing evidence for their usefulness and support from teacher educators, teachers, and librarians, remains somewhat of a controversial concept in k-12 schooling. The articles will explore comics in the contact zone of contemporary schooling in various ways, but herein I want to explore the contact zone in general, especially in terms of how scholars in literacy and the English language arts are considering conflict and how we might see contact zone theory, which originated as an alternative to a lecture-based college curriculum, situated in the curricular history of k-12 schooling. Then, I’ll offer some details on the articles in

this edition of the journal (scroll to the **Contents** section if you'd like to skip my contextualization section). First, though, a vignette:

No super-hero could save me from my first visit with the new high school guidance counselor. As I sat across the desk from her, a rising 10th grader who had just finished near the top of his 9th grade class at the poorer, more diverse of my county's two junior highs and in the top ten of all entering sophomores. She was informing me that I should seek the vocational track for my next three years of schooling, which, I suppose, she thought would be my last. I should say that I wasn't just defined as from the poorer school, but as a poor person, the oldest child in a large family with parents who never finished high school and who certainly weren't part of the community's jet set. There were kids that fit a certain description: wealthy, living in big houses, having well-respected parents. These were this county's college-bound. Not the skinny kid with the unwashed clothes and the long, curly and unkempt hair. He was... an anomaly at best.

I remember being angry but having the feeling that I needed to stay calm. I did: "I fully intend to go to college someday," I insisted. She continued to explain the difference in rigor between the academic and vocational tracks. I leaned in to her, "If I am not scheduled for classes in the academic track – and I will check with the principal to make sure I know what those classes are – you will have to deal with my mother."

Or something like that. What I remember most – yes, that kid was me, and the vignette is based on true events – is that the prospect of a visit with my take-guff-from-no-one mother was enough to convince her. I wasn't placed in honors classes right away – I had to spend my sophomore

year proving I deserved in them – but I was placed in the academic track. What if my gumption, my will, or my God wasn't with me that day? What if I had avoided conflict like a good little boy and had accepted what this authority figure had offered me? Would I have graduated with a terminal degree from a university consistently ranked as one of the top public institutions in the country, as I have done? Had I not acknowledged a conflict of interests and wrestled with it forthrightly, would I be writing this introduction now?

Figure 1/Textbox: Caption: Key Terms Associated with Contact Zone Theory

Familiarizing yourself with these definitions will help you to understand the nuances of Contact Zone Theory. Each of the terms is referenced in this and subsequent articles.

Contact zones: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” and where those involved in the educational experience may “reconsider the models of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing and that are under challenge today” (Pratt 2002, p.4).

Safe Houses: “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, [and] temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (Pratt 2002, p.17).

Autoethnography: a text “in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them....that the so-defined others construct *in response to* or in dialogue with those texts” (Pratt 2002, pgs. 5-6).

Transculturations: “processes whereby members of subordinated groups or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt 2002, p.9).

Speech acts: too often homogenous, monolingual representations of voices of power which need to be transformed into dialogic entities rather than teacher-based or dominant discourse-based.

Unsolicited oppositional discourse: along with parody, resistance, and critique, things that need to be seen more in classrooms. Students engaged in less teacher-centered modes of learning may feel more free to challenge norms and engage in critical literacy practices, making text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections as they feel comfortable discussing their own, other people's, and other entities' positions and positionality.

I will say it again: schooling is a contact zone. If not for a Green Lantern-like will, the contact zone engaged between me and my guidance councilor might have significantly altered my lifeline. Worse, I might never have realized it. Imagine how many hundreds of other students might have simply assumed that the authority figure was right. Of course, teachers and counselors can be on the other side of those power relations as well. Too often, conflict -- or meeting it, studying how we clash with it, and grappling with how to resolve it -- is pushed aside in our schooling interactions, like a dirty little unexamined secret. I am here to tell you that putting it front and center for both teachers and students is an important, even heroic, task. Before seeing how recent scholarship in literacy and the English language arts is finally embracing conflict, and where comics and graphic novels fit in, though, let us consider Pratt's contact zone in terms of curricular theories:

In divorcing herself from a traditional lecture-based classroom setting, which was and is essentially a receptacle model of learning, Pratt develops a preference for a more **critical pedagogy**, a system of education that recognizes students' personal and social worlds, that is more constructivist and critical in nature and which calls for examination of the self in relation to myriad other social, political, and cultural constructs. She says that when her classroom was in the contact zone, "[e]very single text we read stood in specific historical relationships to the students in the class" even as "the range and variety of historical relationships in play were enormous" (2002, p.16). Pratt suggests that contact zone pedagogy "put[s] ideas and identities on the line" (p.16) as students draw from prior knowledge, build communal knowledge and come to "constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of

trust, shared understandings” (p.17) and more even as they explore and examine rage, incomprehension, pain, wonder, revelation, mutual understanding and new wisdoms (p.17).

Pratt’s goal is to make the classroom a more organic place, a living, breathing social space filled with freethinking individuals of both similar *and* diverse experiences. When these experiences are wrapped up in the culture of the classroom as well as in newly acknowledged culture/s at large, a contact zone can be enacted, and social issues and the texts that get at them (including the texts of the self) are the prime agents of engagement. In Pratt’s construction of the contact zone, “no one was excluded, no one was safe” (Pratt 2002, p.17). A level of sharing and revealing, of contributing and creating, gives everyone equal authority, which can be freeing even as it is unnerving. Pratt concludes her essay by situating her theory in larger pedagogical precedents and movements:

Our job in the Americas course [the course where she and her students developed and implemented contact zone principles] remains to figure out how to make that crossroads the best site of learning it can be. We are still looking for the pedagogical arts of the contact zone.¹ These will include, we are sure, exercises in storytelling and in identifying with ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others’ experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms); the redemption of the oral; ways for people to

¹ I assume Pratt refers to her students as well as to educators with similar desires for change when she references this “We.” Pratt is drawing on her personal experiences as exemplars of how the contact zone can be applied or employed in settings beyond her own classroom.

interact with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories); ways *to move into and out of* [author's emphasis] rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all-important concept of cultural mediation.” (Pratt, 2002, p.17)

Pratt essentially calls for a radical reinvention of the college curriculum. As such, her theory can be situated squarely in the tradition of other **reconceptualist** educators. It is no surprise that Pratt often reads like a paraphrasing of Paulo Freire (1970), or that contact zone scholars such as Daphne Key (2002), Robert D. Murray (2002) see connections between Freire and Pratt. As well, Gaughan (2001) is quick to connect Pratt's concept to his own contact zone work in the secondary English classroom and refers specifically to the works of reconceptualists Maxine Greene (1992) and Henry Giroux (1992) as other influences.

Yet, aspects of contact zone theory can be traced even further into the history of education and curriculum. For example, the strong focus on discourse and self-analysis seems to me to be directly tied to Socrates' infamously mind-bending dialogues. Because of the dialogic relations involved in both, contact zone theory and Paideia seminar strategies (Adler 1982) are complementary. Paideia seminars are highly Socratic in that they ask teachers and students to focus on asking questions of increasing depth, intricacy and relativity. They are also highly democratic and equalize the discursive authority of both students and teachers in that everyone is

expected to participate in discussion and to contribute to the class' shared knowledge.² Much more recent work by James Gee (2005), which asks educators and students to attempt examination of the sometimes subconscious frameworks they bring to educational and social settings continues to explore the discourse/discord connection inherent in working in the contact zone. Contact zone teaching is **reconceptualist and discursive** in nature, drawing from pedagogies of the ancient past and more recent times.

John Dewey "emphasized that starting with the experience of the child, far from producing laissez-faire classroom arrangements, increased rather than replaced the demands on judgment by the teacher in directing each pupil's learning toward worthwhile goals" (Dewey 2004, p. 4). It is a basic tenet of his philosophy that education and the curriculum be based on the "existing social life" (p.4). Pratt calls for a similar recognition of students as situated cultural and social entities. Both Dewey and George S. Counts, a contemporary, were proponents of education as a means to create a more humane and democratic society (Flinders and Thornton 2004, p.6). Counts argued as early as the 1930s that "teachers should deliberately reach for power and then make the most of their conquest" (Counts 2004, p.30) in the larger social world. Counts wanted teachers to be empowered activists who would be worthy of a great, earned respect. Pratt's concepts of teacher-power in the classroom are different, but she is tied to Counts' legacy in that both see teachers and their classrooms as places where the established

² Of course, the activity is still very teacher-driven in its formal aspects as there are specific rules by which students must participate (see <http://www.paidiea.org>). As well, Paideia seminars often veer from their Socratic roots in that they are mostly text-based at the expense of self-analysis. Pratt extends ideas of text to include the individual in multiple contexts, so any Paideia seminar drawing from Pratt's pedagogy must be sure to extend discussion from written texts to the texts of the students themselves.

social orders and power-relations should be open to examination. Pratt too sees teachers as activists, but activists who seek to share their authority rather than wield it like a sword.

Dewey, Counts, Harold Ruggs and William Kilpatrick are among the many early 19th-century educators deemed “social reconstructionists,” and Pratt’s contact zone seems deeply rooted in many aspects of their value systems, such as teaching students to be “active participants in a democratic civic community, able to envision, articulate, and act on conceptions of a better world” (Westheimer and Kahne 2002, p.2). These **reconstructionists** see curriculum as “an active force having direct impact on the whole fabric of its human and social context” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slatery, and Taubman 1996, p.29) and “see schooling as an agency of social change” while demanding “that education be relevant both to the student’s interests and to society’s needs” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slatery, and Taubman 1996, p.29). Pratt is essentially calling for a pedagogy that acknowledges social contexts and ties them directly to issues of great relevance to students and their societies.

Reconceptualist educators and scholars have advanced many ideas important to the social reconstructionists. In addition to Freire, Greene, Giroux, and Adler are scholars such as William F. Pinar, Nel Noddings, Michael Apple, Elliot Eisner, Ira Shor, Stanley Aronowitz, and Jonathan Kozol. Allan C. Ornstein and Francis P. Hunkins (2004) say of the reconstructionists that their aims are “to improve and reconstruct society” and that they have a tendency to see “education for change and social reform” (p.55). As a group, they see the educated person as needing the “skills and subjects needed to identify and ameliorate problems of society” and would define learning as “active and concerned with contemporary and future society” (Ornstein

and Hunkins 2004, p.55). Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1996) draw on work by Paul Klover to say that reconceptualists generally take a “holistic, organic view” of humankind and see the individual as “the chief agent in the construction of knowledge” (p.224). Furthermore, “personal liberty and the attainment of higher levels of consciousness become central values” as do “diversity and pluralism,” and reconceptualists seek “new language forms” to “translate fresh meanings” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman 1996, p.224). The teacher thus serves as “an agent of change and reform,” as “a project director and research leader,” someone to help students “become aware of problems confronting humankind” (Ornstein and Hunkins 2004, p.55). Pratt’s thoughts on authority and activism reflect the ideology in these statements, which constitute many of the major tensions that those in the secondary arena may encounter when applying contact zone theory to their settings.

Many reconceptualists have been major influences on English and Language Arts teachers, especially since the late 1970s. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner’s *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969) helped illuminate for English teachers Marshall McLuhan’s (1963) post-modern tenet that the “medium is the message,” explained in simplest terms by the authors by referring to Dewey’s maxim “we learn what we do” (Postman and Weingartner 1969, p.17). The message for English teachers can be simply paraphrased: “How you define English – or let others define it for you -- will be how you teach English (and vice-versa), which will in turn be how your students define English.” Postman and Weingartner’s work paved the way for others who would come to see English and Language Arts education and eventually literacy as an outlet for examining language, meaning, and their connections to culture and self.

So, contact zone theory can be situated in reconceptualist and reconstructivist notions of education, both of which have fueled notions of critical pedagogy and discourse for several decades. While not all English language arts teachers may learn about contact zone theory in their pre-service coursework, most likely many have heard of those doing similar work or advancing similar ideas.

By the 1990s, many teacher education scholars important to English language arts pedagogy were working with aspects of contact zone theory or were already doing similar work to that which Pratt was exploring in her Americas classes. Henry Giroux had published *Border Crossings* in 1991 and edited *Between Borders* in 1993³, both detailing power structures in education and how they might be revisioned to become more democratic, and Kutz and Roskelly's *An Unquiet Pedagogy: Transforming Practice in the English Classroom* (1991) had detailed the language-learning-meaning continuum needed in teaching English and Language Arts in the late 20th century and beyond. They called for "exchanging silent classrooms for talk-filled ones" (1991, p.xi) that use language study as a means to examine literature, culture, and the self while recognizing that doing so illuminates the political nature of teaching and empowers students to recognize and value the many cultures to which they belong and with which they interact daily (p.xii). In 1992 C. Mark Hurlbert and Samuel Totten edited a collection entitled *Social Issues in the English Classroom* that explored serious topics such as race, sexuality, authority and social responsibility, all ripe for entering the contact zone. A focus on critical

³ Border crossing has become an important complementary element of the contact zone. Scholarship that deals with literal or metaphysical political and geopolitical spaces often combines elements of the two constructs (Mendoza 1994; Severino, 2002). This is not surprising considering Pratt's focus on "intersections" and "crossroads." Isn't all comics reading comprised of border crossings?

pedagogy, a pedagogy that seeks to make schooling more equitable via an examination of systems, is apparent in their work.

Miles Myers' 1996 *Changing our Minds: Negotiating English and Literacy* expanded ideas in Postman and Weingartner (1969) and examined five distinctive and ever-evolving "literacy periods" (pp.56-7) in American history before advocating for a critical/translational literacy approach to teaching English. This approach is similar to Kutz and Roskelly's in that it favors language exploration and observation and connections therein to the self (Myers 1996, p.285). It also acknowledges the necessity of shifting from one perspective, stance, and/or mode to others and of recognizing and using various sign systems (pp.286-288). When these ideals drive instruction and student experiences, knowledge becomes socially constructed and helps classroom participants understand "public discourse and contrasting ideas about how the world is put together" (Myers 1996, p.288). The focus on cultural and linguistic examination and the importance placed on learning about the self and the self in relation to various surrounding cultures and sub-cultures matches well with Pratt's ideas on reinventing the classroom experience. He spends several chapters examining translation/critical literacy and the new literacies' expanding concepts of self, speech events, and agency. Decentralization in business and government, growth in technology, changes in mobility for the average citizen and a more diverse population have all led to a need for literacy instruction that seeks to translate the rapidly changing world. Interpretation becomes more important than ever, and the student who might once have been seen as taking the role of the listener, copier, or decoder must now find him/herself acting as a translator among myriad other translators, all trying to make sense of their

complex world via the sign systems and speech acts they encounter, produce, and study (Myers, 1996, pp.56-57). As he discusses speech events; moving among, within and between sign systems; and how classrooms can become centers of critical literacy and self-study, Myers says,

This balance of our individuality and commonality is one of our most serious modern challenges to self-fashioning – “to define ourselves by locating ourselves among different others” (Geertz 1986, 235) [Myers’ citation style], to learn the arts of the contact zone (Pratt 1991), to search for mutuality amidst the threatening uncertainty of many selves (Erikson 1968, 219). (Myers, 1996, p.148)

In fact, Myers sees clubs, in and outside of school, as a way “to accommodate those individual needs for separation and special identity” (1996, p.150) and straightforwardly refers to them as “safe houses,” terminology Pratt uses in her essay to define “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, [and] temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (Pratt 2002, p.17).

John Gaughan (2001) has done much for *directly* illuminating the utility of the contact zone for secondary English language arts educators, though aspects of the theory can be found in the work of others (Rose, 1989; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Fecho, 2004). Gaughan’s *Reinventing English: Teaching in the Contact Zone* (2001) provides several extensive unit lessons in which he and his students entered the contact zone to explore race, gender, oppression, and sexuality. Indeed, Gaughan’s work will become more important as we continue to explore the contact zone-graphic novel interconnectivity.

Reinventing English provides templates for units examining major issues such as the formation of identity, prejudice and racism, sexism, sex and sexuality, censorship, and war and violence (2001, pp.vii-ix). It offers great examples of students examining their views on various texts and relating ideas therein back to themselves and their worlds. The units' consistent format is also worth noting. Gaughan often starts his units with some form of pre-questioning about a given topic (an activity called "4 corners" is a favorite of his) letting discussion and writing activities be the dominant modes. He then goes to a lead-in text like a poem or a picture book before moving into the major texts (novels) for the given unit. Throughout, activities based in writing and discussion offer students and teacher the chance to interact with one another and to challenge ideas.

Often the underlying structures of Pratt's ideas must be inferred from the reader to exist within Gaughan's frameworks. For example, he uses writing to help "diffuse" tense situations (Gaughan 2001, p.29) and he acknowledges that students must feel comfortable and safe enough to share with him and others, but he does not overtly discuss his tactics as providing safe houses. Further, important contact zone terms such as *transculturation* and *autoethnography* do not dot his text even though he has an entire unit devoted to helping student answer the question "who are you?" (Gaughan 2001, p.13). Notice in the following quote that autoethnography, safe houses, transculturation or speech acts – all important elements in Pratt's ideas – are never mentioned:

English teachers have a chance to help students formulate answers to the question
Who are you? By structuring our classes so students feel free to express who they

are (at least at that moment) and by discussing topics that mirror teenage interests, students will use our classrooms to try on their emerging identities. (Gaughan, 2001, p.13)

He mentions the larger construct of the contact zone directly and overtly, saying “*Reinventing English* is about the clashing and grappling my students and I have done when we meet in the contact zone of the classroom” (2001, p.9). This could be because Gaughan wants to make it clear that even though teachers might need to be aware of the elements of the contact zone, students do not. They needn’t know the philosophical underpinnings of a safe house so long as they feel they are secure. They needn’t read Myers to understand speech acts so long as they understand how spoken language is often laced with power relations like privilege, subversion, etc.

Another issue that separates Gaughan from Pratt (and perhaps secondary from collegiate teaching) is the one of structure and control. Pratt wants to see teacher authority, teacher talk even, re-imagined the classroom such that teachers and students are on equal terms. The nature of contemporary schooling can relegate this idea to wishful thinking. College students have a greater maturity than most middle and high school students, and a modicum of control and structure is necessary in any secondary classroom. This may be seen as a weakness in terms of how well Gaughan applies Pratt’s ideas, but it a necessary weakness (It might otherwise be thought of as weakness of Pratt’s pedagogy, though). Gaughan does move students “from comfort zone to contact zone” (Gaughan 2001, p.1) but does not seek to establish a decentering of teacher authority to the degree that Pratt might desire. His book is a discussion of “reading and writing methods that have worked in [his] classes” and “more importantly” a way of getting to “a

different content and different end for English education” (Gaughan, 2001, p.8), but he never forgets his responsibility to his students, school, and community in terms of keeping the methods properly structured in terms of acceptable classroom behavior.

The work of these educators show how the English language arts have been addressing issues associated or directly linked to contact zone theories intersections with critical pedagogy. What all have in common is the belief issues that are controversial and sometimes uncomfortable to explore must be placed at the center of educational considerations at various levels, both in the classroom with students and beyond it. All also share the feeling that dealing with issues that are truly important to students must help drive curriculum.

To be sure, dealing with issues of actual import to students’ lives means embracing a degree of conflict. This has not been lost on many of today’s well-respected English language arts and literacy educators, as recent salient publications reveal. In “The Case for Conflict in Our Classrooms,” for example, Revere High School (MA) teacher Mary Ellen Dakin remarks that “discord has taught me to clarify my thinking, to defend my beliefs, and to speak truth to power” (2008 p.12). She continues, “if conflict in our classrooms remains little more than a literary term for the force that moves forward, then we have sidestepped the mission of public education, which is to prepare young people for a rough-and-tumble democracy (p.12). Dakin says that teachers have become too good at policing themselves, too sheltering, She asks her students to actively engage in activities that, though structured, ask them to grapple with ideas such as immigration, citizenship, free speech and hate speech.

In her 2007 NCTE presidential address, “Where Ignorant Armies Clash by Night,” Joanne Yatvin, an educator with over forty years worth of experience, discusses what she calls “the destruction of American education” (2008, p.363). Governmental control and No Child Left Behind have created a schooling environment based on misunderstandings of how students learn, how teachers teach, and how humans interact with one another in general, she says. She pleads for teachers to “be true” to their colleagues, their knowledge bases, ideals, and their profession in general. Yatvin is aware that public education itself seems caught in a contact zone, one where the meeting, clashing and grappling is being forced out of the classroom via critical considerations and replaced with standardized tests and pressures on teachers to teach to tests rather than to students’ actual needs and zones of proximal development.

As government policy forces teachers away from substantial considerations of themselves and the world around them, literacy scholars and teacher educators continue to drive home the importance of making education relevant to students’ lives and of embracing critical literacy principles intertwined with notions of functional, cultural, new, and multimodal literacies. *Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice* (2007) offers advice and research from leading educators on how education needs to be “re-vision”[ed] (Beers, p.xv) such that 1. literacy skills with which students come to school are valued and recognized (Beers, p.12), 2.that students’ language and insights contribute to new understandings (Keene, p.33), 3.that discussion becomes a significant part of the curriculum (Probst, p.45), 4. that new forms and genres are integrated into lessons and real-life applicability of texts and lessons is stressed (Lesesne, p.66), and 5. that reading, writing, and thinking in the English language arts classroom ultimately

contributes to the handover of civic responsibility from adults to burgeoning adults (Bomer, p.303). What is important to note about this publication is that it recognizes that in the 21st century, a critical pedagogy must also be a multifaceted one, **multimodal** and with an expanding notion of textuality, interaction, and reading.

Secondary School Literacy: What Research Reveals for Classroom Practice (2007) is similarly themed, advising teachers to, as Richard Beech and David O'Brien have put it "reach beyond the familiar curriculum framework that artificially separates reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing to explore how reading and writing may be integrated by engaging students in practices involved in better understanding texts" (p.217), those texts including students and their worlds (Leander and Zacher p.138). The series forward to *Controversies in the Classroom: A Radical Teacher Reader* (2008) advocates for considerations of justice in teaching and asks teachers to say

Goodbye to teaching that is smug and self-satisfied, teaching as authoritative and proud, hiding its conflicts and uncertainties behind a lectern, a textbook, or a 'social science' conceit. Goodbye to teaching that is clerking –something quickly learned, easily assessed, instantly remediated. Goodbye to teaching as trivial pursuit of the obvious.

Welcome to an approach that is overflowing with life, crackling with the surprise and contradictory harmonies of intimacy and love, stunning in its hope for a better world. Welcome to teacher as value-laden, inspirational, and imperfect – a never-ending voyage of discovery and surprise, a continuous work in-progress (xi)

then offers examples of teachers openly engaging with topics such as terrorism, war, globalization, race, ethnicity, language, gender and sexuality.

These texts reveal that informed English language arts and Literacy educators *are* striving to create classroom environments that foster **critical literacy and critical pedagogy**, that acknowledge students' skills and lives and prior knowledge, and which are open to construction of meanings as students make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections. NCTE has published statements on visual literacy, multimodal literacy, fair use in the media, and has defined texts, reading, and being literate broadly at least since 1996. The publication of *Standards for the English Language Arts* – which defines English language arts as reading, writing, listening, speaking, visualizing and visually representing -- firmly articulates that “Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography, and more” (p.6). Embracing conflict appears to mean embracing new forms of expression and grappling with new social spaces and the contact zones inherent in them. A contact zone pedagogy, therefore, is one that may embrace critical, reconceptualist, reconstructivist, visual, social, and multimodal literacies.

In terms of the journal you are reading, this all suggests to me that excellent 21st century teaching in the English language arts must be teaching in the contact zone. And if one is to teach the complete English language arts experience, visual texts need to be studied. The articles in this journal will detail how various teachers and teacher educators are meeting, clashing, and grappling with ways to integrate comics and graphic novels into their classroom.

Contents

Michael Bitz's groundbreaking work with students in the Comic Book Project leaves little doubt that comics can be used to bolster multiple literacy skills. I am pleased to offer readers an article that complements his recent monographs *Manga High: Literacy, Identity and Coming of Age in an Urban High School* (2009) and *When Commas Meet Kryptonit: Classroom Lessons from the Comic Book Project* (2010). It is my belief that Bitz's work is capable of obliterating any conflict remaining from folks who remain skeptical of comics' pedagogical potential. My own contribution explores contact zone precepts in relation to my autoethnographic development as a reader and scholar and suggests that super-hero comics can be as rich a source for mining cultural contact and conflict in schooling as any other genre – in the comics form or otherwise. Nick Kremer shares an article on how he used comics in the classroom to teach mythology but also to make attempts at resolving hot-button issues regarding that literature and larger social and cultural relevance. Laura L. Beadling's focus on Okubo's *Citizen 13660* and how she has taught it may challenge readers' notions of comics in and of themselves while offering compelling analysis.

Of course, one area of conflict and contact regarding the teaching of comics art in the k-12 classroom is feeling comfortable doing so. To assist in that regard, the journal's "Rationales" section offers specific justifications for using certain graphic novels in the classroom. Each rationale suggests an appropriate grade level for a given text, a summary of its contents, a mention of any controversial elements and how they might be addressed, and even lesson ideas for integrating the text into the classroom and with other possible texts. Crag Hill and Brian

Kelley offer rationales for *Pride of Baghdad* and *Magneto Testament*, respectively.

Accompanying these useful resources is Susan Spangler's review of a text bound to help teachers use sequential art in the classroom more confidently and competently, Katie Monnin's *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom* (2010).

When I was considering what the contents of this journal should look like, I never anticipated that an early submission would be a poem. Nor did I think it would be one that so perfectly matches the tenor of this edition. Gale Alcuff's "Comic Vision" forced me and the review board to meet, clash, and grapple with what to do with such texts that clearly connect with the journal's content but that do not fit neatly. To that end, I created an "Emanata" section. I urge readers not to see "Emanata" as something "extra," but just as important an element to the journal as emanata is to comics themselves. Alcuff's poem is joined by the first global distribution of Bran Kelley's *Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, and Comics*, which was originally distributed as a PDF to a small audience of educators in New Jersey in 2009 in order to facilitate teachers' desires to incorporate graphic novels into their classrooms.

I want to thank the members of the Editorial Board and all the reviewers for helping make this issue a reality. The authors are to be praised for their patience and the quality of their work, and I hope they will forgive me any mistakes made in trying to present their excellent efforts.

Charles Hatfield has recently stated that he does not feel that comics studies can ever have a self-contained identity. Nor should it, he argues. Rather, "comics studies will bring together various disciplines and methodologies in a workspace that is at least multidisciplinary if

not truly interdisciplinary. Ideally, it will go further, fostering collaboration and collegueship across disciplinary and programmatic boundaries” (2010, p.2). As someone often asked to peer review articles on the intersection of comics and literacy, I often see the hints of this multidisciplinary but also view its growing pains. At times, it seems hard to give or get a fair peer review when one seeks to publish or is asked to offer professional opinions on comics-and-pedagogy-related work. I often see literacy scholars summing up comics scholarship’s big ideas with a slight nod to Will Eisner or Scott McCloud, as if they are the only thinkers available who consider the medium. Likewise, I sometimes see scholars in the humanities seem just as unaware of the burgeoning body of work on comics and education, not to say the seventy year history that it is extending. My hope is that *SANE journal* becomes an outlet for texts that bridge those gaps, for scholars willing to keep current on comics scholarship and developments in education and literacy. Hatfield continues,

In any case, comics studies, to thrive, must find a stable conceptual basis that is in no way interchangeable with conventional disciplinarity. In order to address seriously the lack of institutional footing for comics studies, and in order to raise standards in the field (which need not mean imposing one rigid set of standards on scholars from multiple disciplines), comics scholars need to develop and make explicit their commitment not simply to multi- but to interdisciplinarity. We need to articulate a rigorous pluralism — self-aware, synthetic, and questioning — if the field is to flourish. We might begin to do this by analyzing our differences in public forums, calling together areas, discussion groups, or caucuses within conferences, appointing disciplinary reviewers and/or sub-editors at journals, working toward shared editorial standards (though not monolithic editorial

practices), and undertaking collaborative projects across disciplinary lines, such as genuine team (not just serial or round-robin) teaching. (p.14).

One goal of mine as founder and editor of *SANE journal* is that it becomes a means to accomplish what Hatfield calls for regarding education's place in comics studies and comics' place in education studies, particularly, but not limited to, literacy studies. I am convinced that literacy research and educational theories can inform any other domain of learning and knowledge, including comics studies, and equally convinced of the inverse. The first step is for scholars to recognize that such diverse bodies exist, of course, then find their corresponding artifacts, and, finally, make use of them and cite them in their own works. May *SANE journal: sequential art narrative in education* provide some of these initial opportunities, and may you read the contents of this inaugural edition with my sincerest gratitude.

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SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Comics in the Contact Zone*

Article 2

1-1-2010

Manga and the Motivated

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Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol1/iss1/2>

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Manga and the Motivated High Schoolers

By Michael Bitz

information in this article was adapted from *Manga High: Literacy, Identity, and Coming of Age in an Urban High School* (Harvard Education Press).

“Manga is my life. It represents who I am.” You might imagine these words from a child in Japan, where manga is thoroughly ingrained into youth culture and has been for many years. Brent Wilson (1999) investigated the closely knit relationships between manga, Japanese children’s drawings, and national identity. Masami Toku (2001, 2005) explored the historical contexts of manga in Japanese children’s lives, and she investigated a subgenre called “shojo manga” written specifically for and oftentimes by young women. Even the Japanese Ministry of Education has adopted manga as part of the art education curriculum in order to simultaneously engage children in learning and preserve this rich aspect of Japanese culture.

In fact, these words—“manga is my life”—did not emanate from a Japanese youth; they came from a fifteen-year-old African American girl in New York City. She has nicknamed herself Sayuri after a character in a popular manga series titled *Kimagure Orange Road*. Sayuri is learning some words in Japanese. And even though she has never been to Japan, does not have any Japanese schoolmates, and certainly does not look Japanese, this girl is connected to Japan in deeply personal ways. Equally fascinating, Sayuri not only reads manga at a voracious pace but also spends most of her free time creating original manga, just like youths in Japan. Figure 1 is a page from Sayuri’s manga about a stormy relationship between girl and boy.



Figure 1: Excerpt from Sayuri: Manga is her life.

Manga aside, from an educator's perspective, Sayuri's commitment to reading and writing is extraordinary. She reads *books*! She writes *drafts*! She edits and revises her work because she wants it to be perfect; after all, it represents who she is. Anne Haas Dyson (1993, 1997, 2003) demonstrated children's desires to embrace popular literature and new literacies as a pathway to identity exploration, and Sayuri does just that. But imagine a whole classroom of young people willing to pursue reading and writing as a pathway to personal identity and cultural exploration. Imagine children actively engaged in the learning process not for the sake of a grade or test score but for the need of personal fulfillment and intellectual advancement. Now imagine all of that in one of New York City's largest high schools.

The Comic Book Project in New York City

Sayuri and another 20 teenagers at Martin Luther King, Jr. High School (MLK HS) are participants in The Comic Book Project, an arts-based literacy initiative that I founded in 2001. The original target population for The Comic Book Project was elementary and middle schoolers. The goal has been to engage inner-city youths in the process of planning, writing, and designing original comic books as a pathway to literacy, creativity, social development, and community building. What began as a small summer project at a middle school in New York City has expanded to 50,000 children in 15 cities across the United States, and now growing internationally in Nigeria, South Africa, Nepal, Australia, and...Japan.

But New York has always been home for The Comic Book Project, in many ways because of remarkable educators there who have molded, expanded, and evolved the process and products. For example, at Intermediate School 349 in Brooklyn a group of boys work together as

a production team to create a single comic book. They each take a role in the creative development: writer, editor, drawer, colorist, inker, producer, and cover designer. At Public School 153, also in Brooklyn, the participants print digital photographs of their school and neighborhood, then use scissors, glue, and construction paper to produce a sequenced story full of action and drama. They write their captions and character dialogue in pre-drawn cartoon bubbles, which they cut and paste onto the photographs. Public Schools 180 and 182 in Harlem use The Comic Book Project as a vehicle to help first- and second-graders—many of them recent immigrants—to create personal histories in English and Spanish.

These are just a few examples of the many New York City comic book clubs, which have become models for the entire world as to how creative learning can naturally wed with academic skill-building. Yet there is none as influential as the comic book club at MLK HS, the first high school program of The Comic Book Project. It began in 2003 the way many clubs do, with an educator who says, “Hmm, I think my kids could benefit from this.” In this case, the educator was the after-school director at MLK HS, a young woman named Rebecca Fabiano who is truly dedicated to helping struggling high schoolers succeed academically and socially. Many of the children with whom she worked at MLK HS were on academic probation and some had criminal records. Some were living with distant relatives, and others were in foster care. For many of the students at MLK HS, the after-school program was a haven from difficult lives in and out of school. Rebecca was their beacon; they often came to her for advice or help, and they knew she was always looking out for their best interests.

Rebecca had heard about The Comic Book Project through The After-School Corporation (TASC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to sustaining after-school programming in New York

City. MLK HS was one of the few high schools in the TASC network, and Rebecca always had her eye out for ways to engage her high schoolers in new initiatives. She called me, and we met. She explained how she wanted to replicate the process and outcomes of The Comic Book Project for MLK HS—that is, to engage her high schoolers in planning and creating original comic books, then publishing and distributing them in the school and beyond.

Rebecca and I discussed who would lead the club and decided to approach one of the school's art teachers, who at the time volunteered as the after-school chess club instructor. The teacher, named Phil DeJean, was not only excited to lead the club but also had an extensive background in and knowledge of manga. He named a number of students—all manga enthusiasts—certain to join the club. Rebecca and I then put the club into Phil's charge, and the club was on its way.

A Focus on Process

The comic book club at MLK HS met every Thursday afternoon from 4:00 to 5:30. It began with about 12 teenage boys and girls, then quickly expanded to 20. Phil provided every student with a sketchbook, intended for ideas, characters, dialogue—whatever came to the students' minds (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Sample of Phil's character design

Phil would walk about the room, peering over shoulders, always giving praise, and usually making suggestions. As I reported to the Robert Bowne Foundation in 2006:

The instructor of this club was very much a mentor. He never lectured and rarely provided direct instruction; rather, the students came to him for advice regarding character design, panel construction, pencil type, and so on. His typical response was, “What do you think?” Students usually walked away having answered their own questions. Any observer of this club would recognize the level of trust and respect established between the teacher and his students. He demanded effort, and they put it forth willingly. The students seemed reluctant to take a break for a snack, and many could be found working on their comic books outside scheduled club hours (p. 8).

Along with the close relationship established with Phil, the students quickly created strong bonds with each other. They critiqued their friends’ work, offering helpful hints about the ears on a certain character or the sequence of ideas in a developing section of the story. They also traded manga that they had collected, and they informed the group about new publications and additions to their favorite series. As the club sessions progressed, the high schoolers began to don each other with Japanese nicknames. They began to fantasize about their lives as manga characters. One girl pretended to have a mouse that lived in her head and fed her ideas for plotlines and character designs. The concepts in the sketchbooks soon intertwined with real life. I believe that these fantasies were more than youthful follies. They were opportunities to “try on” another life—a life thousands of miles away from all the pressures of growing up in New York City.

The sketchbooks eventually morphed into storyboards. Some students worked at a faster pace than others, but the environment was not competitive. Phil encouraged the participants to hone their storylines and characters early in the process, rather than making difficult adjustments in the near final versions of the comics. Once the students finished penciled pages, they placed

their work on a light box (a tracing mechanism with semi-opaque glass and fluorescent bulbs) and employed a variety of black pens to ink their work onto a new piece of paper. Phil taught the students how to use the pens to design shadows and other effects with cross-hatching, a crisscross technique customary throughout the comic book medium. The students became proficient at cross-hatching and other artistic skills in their sketchbooks before applying those techniques to the panels of their comics. Eventually, pages of original manga were inked and ready for color.

Most of the other comic book clubs that I have worked with used colored pencils, crayons, or markers to bring their comic books to life with color. The students at MLK HS approached color with an altogether different method. Using a flatbed scanner that I donated to the club, they scanned their black-and-white drawings into the decrepit computer in the corner of the room. They then used Adobe Photoshop—specifically the “magic wand” and “fill bucket” tools—to digitally colorize their artwork. The students also used the “text tool” to write the dialogue and captions; they experimented with a variety of fonts, weights, and typefaces for the letters. The results were fantastic: incredibly designed and beautifully colored manga. The children were amazed at what they had created. They were proud of themselves, and pleased that other people were so impressed with their work. For many of the club participants, these comic books represented the first and only time that they had been celebrated for their academic accomplishments.

Once the club’s creations were complete, it was important to celebrate the students’ manga in as many ways as possible. With funding we secured from TASC, we printed the student work in a full-color publication distributed throughout MLK HS and other outlets in the

surrounding community. We arranged a special event at the nearby Barnes & Noble, which generously highlighted and supported community-based programs, in an effort to capitalize on the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation cultivated by children publishing and presenting original work (see Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Elbow, 1998; Graves, 1983). The students presented their work to over 100 people: parents, teachers, friends, and manga enthusiasts. The students were the stars of the event: they sat at a table on a platform with microphones in front of each of them. They introduced their stories, and they spoke about themselves as artists and writers. They explained why manga was so important to them and how they collaborated with each other throughout the process. The event was covered by a Japanese television station—the reporter interviewed the students in Japanese through a translator. Near the end of the event, we announced two students who were selected for a summer scholarship donated by the Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont. The students would travel on Amtrak from gritty New York City to bucolic White River Junction for an intense week of cartooning and comics development. For those students and the others from MLK HS who attended the workshop in subsequent years, this was a life-changing experience.

A Look at Results

By all accounts, the comic book club at MLK HS was an unmitigated success. But it is the children's work itself that represents just how much they accomplished. Below are three annotated selections.

Figure 3, titled “My Own X-File” is a first-person account based on “real-life events” about alien spacecraft suddenly appearing above a middle school. Interestingly, although the

story is narrated by a female character in the manga tradition of large eyes and silky hair, the work was actually created by a male student in the club. The author's use of a woman to depict an event that happened to him represents just how integral female characters are in manga. A fan of American comic books might have designed a caped superhero or perhaps a likeness of himself as a comic book character. In manga, however, this young man turned himself into a *bishoujo*, or "beautiful girl."

Figure 3 exemplifies some important aspects of comics in relation to traditional reading skills such as sequencing and making inferences. The first panel introduces us to the title and author; logically, we move immediately to the right and begin reading the story. In doing so, however, we see that the text begins with: "Then I saw something in the sky..." Something is amiss—why would a story begin with the word "then"? Upon some exploration, we realize that we made a mistake in the sequencing. The story begins with the panel just below the title: "It was late at night..." In order to make sense of the story, we readers have to sequence the panels—a skill crucial for young readers to comprehend texts. Furthermore, all throughout this comic book page, as with any text, we have to make inferences about the author's intentions and text references. The page ends with the words: "I will believe the truth is out there..." We can infer that this story will continue, perhaps with the character retelling the tale to disbelieving friends before communicating with the aliens. Only the author knows, one of the true joys of reading and writing.



Figure 3: Comics in relation to traditional story-telling elements.

Figure 4 represents the extent to which manga has influenced the students in the comic book club at MLK HS. In this humorous example by a high school girl, the characters introduce themselves at the beginning of the story, a common opening to a manga. They are different species: fox, human, and bunny. The focus here is on the bunnies; one says, “I’m number 5 out of 620 and still going!” While references to sex follow, there is nothing graphic here, as is typical of manga. Instead humor and lightheartedness reign as the bunny children force out of mind their parents’ commitment to procreation. Also, as is common in manga, the characters go through a series of trials. As the trials progress, the situations become sillier and the story more outlandish.

While the trials are characteristic of manga, the subject of those trials elucidates the extent to which the students have embraced Japanese culture. The character named Strife endures these trials to determine whether he can be considered a *bishi*—short for *bishounen* or “beautiful youth” in Japanese. A *bishi* is a Japanese male adolescent oftentimes exhibiting effeminate characteristics and demonstrating sexual ambiguity. While the reference is common in modern Japanese manga and anime (where this young American creator certainly learned of it), the term extends as far back as Lady Murasaki Shikibu’s *Tale of the Genji* first published around 1000 B.C.E. Several other Japanese terms appear in the girl’s manga, including *chibi* (diminutive child), *ecchi* (pervert), and *miko* (priestess).



Figure 4: Manga's influence is obvious.

Figure 5, by a male club member, is a dynamic visual display representing another aspect of Japanese culture that particularly attracted the boys in the group: samurai warriors. In this example, the panels overlay each other in such a way that the reader absorbs the sequence alongside the overall impact of the page. The warrior's sword halves the page, allowing the author to change the point of view from a close-up on the warrior's face to a pan of the landscape, accompanied by a dramatic "wshhh" of the leaves. The details on this page—note the hilt of the sword—elucidate the dedication of this particular student to creating manga. This is neither a simple sketch nor a random page of doodles; here is a well-planned and carefully crafted excerpt of visual and literary narrative.

The page is also the prelude to a violent battle scene, which was common in the work of many club members at MLK HS, including some of the girls. Rather than banning violent content in the students' comic books, Phil encouraged the students to think critically about violence, and they discussed pertinent questions. Why does violence occur in society? What are some ways that your characters could avoid violent confrontations? If you are going to include violence in your comic, what are some ways to portray the action so that it is appropriate for young audiences? These open-ended discussions, which usually transpired while the students were hard at work on their comics, allowed for frank and honest dialogue about the nature of life and the world in which we live, lessons that go well beyond the ink of a comic book.

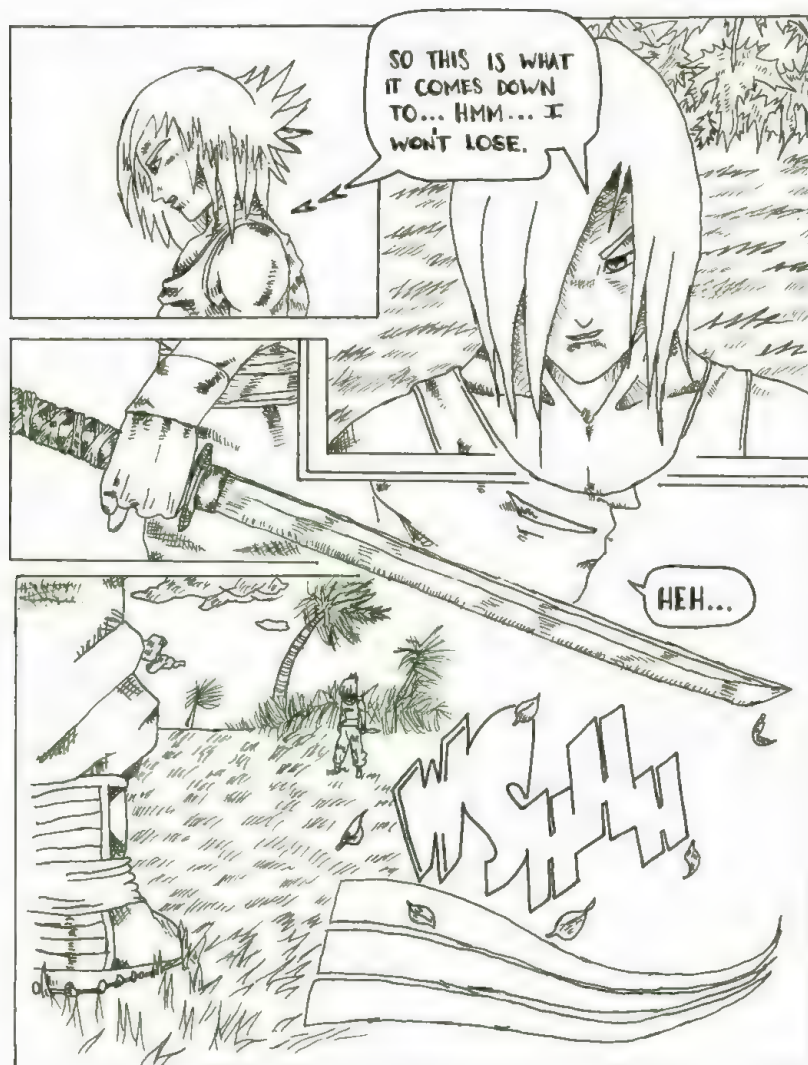


Figure 5: Dynamic display of culture and form

Meeting the Standards

The New York State Learning Standards for English Language Arts (1996) reinforce that literacy entails “reading, writing, listening, and speaking,” and NCTE/IRA define the English language arts as reading, writing, listening, speaking, visualizing, and visually representing

(1996). Although these student manga creators spent an extraordinary amount of time drawing and designing their manga, they also spent extensive time writing their plots and storylines; correcting elements of grammar, spelling, and punctuation; considering the literary elements of tone and atmosphere; drafting and revising character traits and plot twists; and publishing and presenting their completed products. In other words, many (if not all) of the literacy skills and practices that English language arts teachers reinforce in their classrooms were embedded into the processes and products of the MLK HS comic book club. Based on these activities, students addressed NCTE/IRA standards 3,4,5,6,and 12.

In an effort to promote all realms of literacy, we often encouraged the students at MLK HS to speak about their creations and experiences. Below is a transcription of a speech by a young man named Keith who was a member of the club since its inception. Keith has created a series of comics about a character named Jack Snipe, a cyborg ninja with a goal to assist helpless people in the world. Jack Snipe's backstory begins in a foster home. Not coincidentally, Keith had been in foster care since he was young. In his senior year of high school, he "aged out" of the system, which put him on the street for several weeks. In the speech, Keith describes how the club at MLK HS began and how it has evolved.

Here I stand in front of you to tell you a story. A story of an after-school program club called the comic book club. This club from what I experienced has changed the lives of many young and talented artists. Especially mine, but just as the way every story has a beginning, so does mine.

For as long as I could remember, I loved cartoons and superheroes. I especially loved art. When I entered ninth grade at MLK High School, I loved to draw. My art back then was raw and booming with potential, but it lacked discipline. It lacked style, and most importantly it lacked direction. One of the teachers at the after-school program, Ms. S. saw this and introduced me to Mr. D. who was doing this new program called the comic book club. At the time, although I really loved

them, I didn't really know what a comic book was or what one even looked like. So Mr. D. gave directions to a comic book store that he goes to called Jim Hanley's Universe. He told me to go there and look around. The next time he sees me, he will ask me a question that would change my life forever.

So I went to the store later that week. As soon as I stepped through the door I felt like I was in heaven. I felt like that place was where I belonged.

Going to that store opened my eyes into the worlds of famous heroes like Spider-man, Superman, X-Men, the Avengers, etc. Not only them though but to other comics that I never seen before. They introduced me to the world of manga.

When I returned the next week, I was more focused and driven than I was before. Going to that store had given me a sense of focus and direction. It made me realize the thing that I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing. So when I went to the club next week, Mr. D. asked me the question that would change my life forever: "Are you ready to master the art of making comic books?"

After that week, Mr. D. taught me and the rest of the club members the basics on making comics. He taught us how to ink, how to draw characters, how to design stories, panel design, etc. Back then since it was the club's founding year, there weren't a lot of members. But we all used everything we knew and created comics. At the end of the year, there was a grand ceremony at Barnes & Noble up the street from the school. At the ceremony we were treated like celebrities. TV cameras, art galleries, an audience, we even did a comic book signing. This was set up by the staff of the after school, Patricia Ayala and her boss Dr. Michael Bitz, a guy who we referred to back then as the "comic book guy," because he would come and not only check up on our progress of our comic books, but he would bring us free comics. The first year was great. Although when it ended we all were sad. But I wasn't. I was determined to use my summer not as a vacation but to use it as a time to train and better myself. So that way next year my comic would be twice as good as the first.

The next year was a good year. That year was the year I met people who were great artists and wrote great stories, but was a little wacky and hyperactive. That year was the year I met the masterful artist Yuri, whose art was so good you could've sworn she was some type of prodigy, but her art makes up for her cluelessness. The cute but wacky Laura, whose art and stories were deeper and more meaningful than they appeared. The shy Treasure, whose art was really unique and great but back then she couldn't see it. The energetic and bold Imani, whose art and stories were often hilarious. The quiet but intimidating Lauren whose art level was real close to Yuri's. These girls were on a totally different level. We all got together and worked on our individual art skills.

In the 11th grade, the next year, that was a bad year for me. I was going through some problems at home and I was banned from the comic book club...for a month! But when I returned I met some truly amazing artists. There was the legendary Kisha. Her art was truly masterful. The only thing was that she lacked direction. She drew some truly breathtaking pictures, but she didn't have a story for them. So Mr. D. helped her out personally. There were also the bad boys of the comic book club: Jonathan and Oliver. Those two were truly an amazing pair. J. had an amazing style, and his stories were not only amazing but truly spectacular. They were stories that would get you all excited and inspired. Liver's art was crazy hot. With Mr. D.'s help, he learned how to truly master the American style. Not only that, but he was able to do what only a little of us had barely managed to do. He had truly mastered anatomy. There was also Davon; D., in my opinion, learned how to write a captivating story way before he didn't know anything about comics.

I was happy to return to the comic book club because it rekindled my love for comics. It also drove me to be a better artist than I originally was. I guess you could see it from my actions.

As the problems got more and more serious, it became harder and harder for me to be in the comic book club. So I drew and worked on comics whenever I could.

With me drawing all the time, I became known as the artist of the school. Around that time I guess the teachers noticed this. That's when Roy, the parent coordinator of the school, asked me and some other people from the club to do murals for the school.

I guess around that time is when me and Reggie started our rivalry. Our rivalry became so great and well known that the school itself started changing. It wasn't a very big or noticeable change—that only someone who would sit back and observe could notice. The school itself around that time started taking a turn toward art. The school started asking the artists to do more and more art for the school. It was like a dream come true. Not only that, but the students around the school started to become more and more outgoing with art. People started coming up with their own stories, and people who had stories but was too shy to share started exposing their stories. It was at this time that the comic book club flourished.

At the end of the school year my problems at home became so great that I didn't get my comic done. But Mr. D. helped me put something together. At the grand ceremony, there was so much people there that there wasn't enough room up on stage. After the questions, Dr. Bitz and Ms. F. (the runner of the after-school program) had announced that the comic book club had grown so much that it had spread out to different schools. Also they announced that me and L. had won a

scholarship to go to Vermont, to a school that had a special program that taught young artists about comic books and cartoons. It was great. A week after the ceremony, me and Laura left for Vermont. It was great there. We met people from all over the United States. (My roommate was from Texas). And the classes we took were taught by famous comic artists. There they taught us all the basics of comic making and the history of comics and cartoons. Me and Laura were focused and worked hard all day, and we both went crazy all night. Sadly, when we came back to New York, Laura moved to Florida.

The last year wasn't so great as the other years. The comic influence on the school wasn't as great as last year. Also a lot of wannabe, sucky artists tried to step up and claim they were the best. Also, my problems in my personal life were so great that I was hardly ever at the club. The rivalry between me and Dreadhead grew tenfold, and at the ceremony at the end of the year it was different. They did a ceremony where children from all over came and shared out their comics.

Now I stand in front of you all today to say that I love the comic book club. It helps you grow as an artist and also lets your mind flourish. The comic book club is a great program. It led up to help me be the great artist I am today.

Conclusion

Imagine everything that Keith has experienced, and then letting your “mind flourish” and referring to yourself as “the great artist I am today.” Here lies the true power of the arts specifically and creative expression in general. They can be actual, tangible pathways to a better life. Where once Keith had every reason to lose hope for a future, making comic books helped him establish goals and dreams. And while he may or may not become a famous comic book creator, he has certainly built academic and technical skills relevant to a variety of careers, including graphic design, advertising, publishing, animation, and even business. He is entering Kingsborough Community College this year, and I—like all the other adults who have seen him through his high school years—am keeping my fingers crossed.

The comic book club at MLK HS lives on, every year culminating with a publication, panel discussion at the Barnes & Noble, and two fortunate students taking the seven hour train ride to Vermont for a week of intensive cartooning. While Rebecca has since moved to Philadelphia, Phil still leads this group of high schoolers, and their work has grown in quality and quantity. Moreover, other comic book clubs around the country have used the work from MLK HS as a model in terms of form and process.

When I look back at what the students at MLK HS have accomplished over the past three years, I am struck most by their true desire to create comics, whether manga or otherwise. Had they not had an outlet for their creations at the school, they would be writing and drawing comics at home or in the park or wherever they could sit with paper and a pencil. Instead, the Comic Book Project offered them a safe house (Pratt, 2002) in which to explore their talents and form their identities. They willingly and actively communicate by reading, writing, listening, and speaking for information and understanding, literacy response and understanding, critical analysis and evaluation, and social interaction. In other words, they accomplish every one of the state learning standards in English language arts. If we educators could only pull our heads out of our textbooks, we would see a fertile world of literacy and learning just waiting to be explored.

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SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Comics in the Contact Zone*

Article 3

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Carter, James Bucky Ph.D. (2010) "Everything I Learned About Teaching in the Contact Zone I Learned From Charles Xavier and the Uncanny X-Men," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol1/iss1/3>

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Everything I Learned About Teaching in the Contact Zone I Learned from Charles Xavier and The Uncanny X-Men

By James Bucky Carter, Ph.D.

“To me, my X-Men!” – Charles Xavier

*“The most important graphic narratives explore the conflicted boundaries of what can be said
and what can be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories”*

– Hillary Chute in *PMLA* March ‘08

Introduction

In this article I assert that reading and studying comics via the lens of what Mary Louise Pratt has called the “contact zone” can help illuminate important sociocultural tensions and values inherent in many examples of comics art and in contemporary notions of schooling. Using contact zone precepts and terminology is especially useful when examining texts that embrace pedagogy, as the *X-Men* titles have for most of their fifty-year history. I assert that teachers at the college and secondary levels should consider applying the lens of contact zone theory to explications and examinations of comics texts and that doing so in the secondary and university classroom can open up discussions not only about comics but about the contemporary educational settings in which students find themselves. Keeping with Pratt’s assertion that autoethnographic texts should be examined for their sociocultural importance in shaping individuals and cultures, I draw from my own early reading experiences and examine how the *X-Men* series of comic books illuminated power relations for me. I focus specifically on two issues,

Classic X-Men #1 and *Uncanny X-Men* # 196. I further claim that due to comics' history as texts that have been "lumped together" regarding their literary and pedagogical merit despite the variety of genres and topics they address and as texts that have often met with suspicion or apprehension from many teachers and other facets of society, by considering the medium for integration into the classroom, teachers are taking steps to initiate learning rooted in contact zone principles.

Getting Started: The Vocabulary of the Contact Zone

Contact zone theory has a complex terminology. Herein, I define terms before explicating examples from *X-Men* and other comics, graphic novels, and proto-comics texts that illustrate the terms at work. I start with a definition of the contact zone itself and then offer definitions for the terms that stem from that over-arching construct: Contact zones are defined by Pratt as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" and where those involved in the educational experience may "reconsider the models of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing and that are under challenge today" (Pratt 2002, p.4). Essential to contact zones are safe houses. Safe houses are "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, [and] temporary protection from legacies of oppression" (Pratt 2002, p.17). Pratt situates contact zone theory in autoethnography and autoethnographic text, defined as text "in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with

representations others have made of them....autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct *in response to* or in dialogue with those texts” (Pratt 2002, pgs. 5-6).

Transculturation, speech acts, and unsolicited oppositional discourse are other important contact zone constructs. Transculturations are “processes whereby members of subordinated groups or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt 2002, p.9). To Pratt, speech acts are too often homogenous, monolingual representations of voices of power (read *teacher-based* or *based in dominant discourses*) which need to be transformed into dialogic entities. Unsolicited oppositional discourse, along with parody, resistance, and critique, need more attention in educational settings. Students engaged in less teacher-centered modes of learning may feel more free to challenge norms and engage in critical literacy practices, making text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections as they feel comfortable discussing their own, other people’s, and other entities’ positions and positionality.

Intertwined Histories: The Contact Zone, Visual Texts, Comics, and Authentic Learning Potentiality

It is also important to note that contact zone theory is particularly imagetext-friendly in the terms of how WJT Mitchell describes it. According to Mitchell, imagetexts are “composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text” successfully. They stand in opposition to instances of image-text, which “designates *relations* of the visual and verbal,” and image-text, which refers to instances of cleavage in print and visual interactions (Mitchell 1994, p.89). Pratt draws from ancient Andean proto-comics (which I describe in later paragraphs) that

successfully combine word and image and from baseball cards, once ubiquitously lumped with comic books as similar collectibles and passions, to help explain several of the contact zone-specific terms mentioned above, and she mentions her son's affinity for baseball cards – along with comics, a form of multimodal textuality that offers informative text and visuals – as one of the few examples of authentic literacy engagement he experiences, due to traditional schooling's often monolithic structures:

Sam [her son] and Willie [his friend] learned a lot about phonics that year by trying to decipher surnames on baseball cards [most notably Manny Trillo, who they dub “Many Trails,” and Carl Yastrzemski], and a lot about cities, states, heights, weights, places of birth, stages of life....I watched Sam apply his arithmetic skills to working out batting averages and subtracting retirement years from rookie years; I watched him develop senses of patterning and order by arranging and rearranging his cards for hours on end, and aesthetic judgment by comparing different photos, different series, layouts, and color schemes. (Pratt 2002, p.1)

Pratt mentions geography, history, economics, and socialization as other areas in which Sam's multiple literacies grew via exploring the cards. Yet, she finds it “unforgivable that schooling itself gave him nothing remotely as meaningful to do, let alone anything that would actually take him beyond the referential, masculinist ethos of baseball and its lore” (Pratt 2002, p.3). Comics too have a reputation of having a masculine ethos, but it is remarkable how even super-hero comics connect to contact zone concepts. A classic example is how various heroes often first meet: first they approach one another cautiously as villains (meet). They then discover similar

but also opposing agendas (clash) and fight. Finally, they work out their conflict and come to terms with finding common ground or parting ways (grapple/resolve).

Cultural contact, conflict, and transculturations are inherently intertwined with any type of education, and sequential art – as comics *and* proto-comics -- has a long history of being used to educate in the sense of creating and dispersing interpretations of history laced with specific values and from specific points of view. Many trace sequential art's history to the ancient past (McCloud 1993; Eisner 1996). Scott McCloud even leads readers through an interpretation of what he calls "A pre-Columbian picture manuscript 'discovered' by Cortes around 1519" (1993, p.10) and uses it as a historical jumping point *backwards* through time, to the Bayeux Tapestry, a piece of sequential art detailing the Norman Conquest of 1066 as told by the descendants of the winners, and to certain Egyptian hieroglyphics. Rodolphe Töpffer, a Swiss school teacher working in the late 19th century, is often credited with creating the first genuine sequential art narratives with enough recognizable form to be considered forerunners of comics and graphic novels (Kunzle 2007). This work, started roughly in the 1820s, "employed cartooning and panel borders, and featured the first independent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe" (McCloud 1993, p.17). This work began as a hobby. He often created picture-stories for his pupils' and friends' amusement (De Sa 2003). Töpffer, considered to be the father of the comic book, was by trade a *teacher*, establishing his own boarding school for boys at about the same time as scholars have traced his earliest proto-comics, but this particular connection to education and the contact zone, while interesting, is fairly coincidental. Since Töpffer, artists such as Lynd Ward (see Ward 1974), Frans Masereel (see Masereel 1998; Donahue 2005), and many others have explored and expanded the concept of sequential art, many times as a means to tell

controversial stories and/or make serious or satirical social commentary. Even these proto-comics were meeting and grappling in the context of their social settings, engaging the contact zone before it was named as such.

Another way in which comics have been grappling in contact zone precepts is through the stigma of being thought of as a “low” medium of little merit, or even as a medium at all. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester chronicle this tension in *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* (2004). The collection reprints comics-centered commentary from the likes of E.E. Cummings, Umberto Eco, Thomas Mann, Marshall McLuhan, and others. Many of the writers included from the first half of the twentieth century speak to the wariness that many may still feel towards the combination of words and pictures in sequence: they are worried that comics are low forms of entertainment, for the masses; they want it made clear that comics are diversionary, not at all literature; there is the fear that they are harmful, responsible for a dumbing down of culture at large, that they are addictive like narcotics. In fact, in the collection Dorothy Parker grudgingly admits she likes comic strips, but in the same way a junkie likes shooting cocaine (Heer & Worcester 2004, p.35).

Indeed, in 1954 psychologist Fredrick Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* suggested that comic book reading promoted violence and homosexuality, among other behaviors he considered vices. His work, which can be seen as part and parcel of the moral and political hysteria that defined much of 1950s American culture, led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority, which still regulates the content of some comics, most notably *Archie* and its related titles. Wertham might have been the most visible figure in the anti-comics argument, but librarians, parents and politicians had been expressing concern over comics’ literary value and

societal worth before, during, and after Wertham's influence led to senate hearings and proposed legislation to heavily regulate the comics industry. Perhaps this possibility of dangerous influence is why, until just lately (Carter 2007; Frey and Fisher 2008; Thompson 2008), graphic novels have gained little attention in the secondary classroom, though there has even been a recent spate of censorship cases involving graphic novels in public and school libraries and classrooms. It should be noted that many educators and scholars were writing articles that showed favorable relationships between comics and literacy. Indeed, articles in respected academic journals illustrating comics' benefit to readers began appearing in the 1940s, and several journals allotted space for those who tried to discredit Wertham's claims. Editions of *The Journal of Educational Sociology* appearing in 1944 and 1949 focused almost solely on the positive relationships between comics and their readers.

Contemporary Comics Narratives and Contact Zones

These aspects of sequential art narratives' history show that they are entwined with concepts of education, influence, and tangible social consequence. Comics just seem to have a quality of subversive danger about them for many, whether they merit it or not (unfortunately, a common perspective is to think of all comics as the same regardless of the variety of themes and topics they address and age-ranges to which they cater, though there is evidence that teachers are starting to see the myriad qualities of the medium). Not until concepts of literacy, learning, and meaning were expanded could this medium be properly imported to the classroom. Perhaps this is because sequential art narratives seem to inherently create contact zones in school settings, to create the potential for dissonance and to reveal difference, something that traditional, over-homogenizing pedagogies tend to avoid.

The serious content of many graphic novels and comics may be indicative of this point. *Pedro and Me* (Winnick 2000), for example, explores homosexuality and socio-sexual responsibility via AIDs prevention. Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer-prize winning *Maus* (1986) explores concepts of authority, supremacy, and genocide. Ho Che Anderson's *King* (2005) explores racism throughout Martin Luther King Jr's life. Brian K. Vaughn and Nicho Henrichon's *Pride of Baghdad* (2006) considers consequences of the Iraq War. *The 9/11 Report* graphic novel adaptation by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon (2006) and Alissa Torres' *American Widow* (2008) deal with 9/11 and its aftermath. Similar themes are examined in even popular comics such as *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Uncanny X-Men*. Both have explored domestic violence, drug abuse, stereotyping and racial profiling, among other social issues (Daniels 1991). Green Arrow's sidekick was revealed to be a drug addict in an influential run in that hero's eponymous series. Even series featuring heroes such as the Hulk and Iron Man, as their recent film incarnations have illustrated, ask subtle serious questions about the balance between humanity and technology, the mind and the heart, ethics, commerce, and responsibility. These are not always easy topics to broach in the classroom. But some form of discourse must take on the challenge of exploring difficult topics, and there is no shortage of means available by which to do so if teachers or students find it important work.

Pratt's pointing to the ancient case of Guaman Poma, the Andean responsible for *The First New Chronicle and Good Government*, a series of letters dated 1613 and written in Quecha and rough Spanish, reveals the visual text of proto-comics as discourse not afraid to enter the contact zone. The letters address King Phillip of Spain and offer a critical retelling of Spanish conquest in his region from the point of view of the conquered, sometimes using his native

language, other times Spanish. Pratt uses the letters as an example of writing that illustrates the contact zone and its principles. Guaman Poma's work is a perfect example of contact zone theory in action, and it retains a connection to comics and graphic novels as well, though this may not have been apparent to Pratt. Just as graphic novels combine words and pictures to create hybrid forms, so too did the letters via their meshing of languages and the inclusion of over 400 illustrations. As Pratt says, "the transcultural character of Guaman Poma's text is intricately apparent in its visual as well as its written component" (Pratt 2002, p.9).

The first image on the next page of this essay shows figures talking to one another, words issuing from their mouths as in contemporary comics, though without word balloons. The second image shows a page arranged very much like a comic book, with panels and an apparent sequence to the story, which details Spaniards abusing their power over the Incas. The page layout is specific and intentional, just as it is in today's best graphic novels: "The Spaniard is in a high position indicating dominance, but on the 'wrong' (right hand) side. The diagonals of his lance and that of the servant doing the flogging mark the line of illegitimate, though real, power," to represent Guaman Poma's interpretation of the world the Spaniards had crafted, a "world in reverse" (Pratt 2002, p. 10). I see this as an ancient reading of the word as world (Freire 1970), an instance where word and image combine to make political critique of an imbalanced power structure. Furthermore, McCloud argues that the borders, or gutters, between the panels of sequential art narratives are as important as the images themselves. Within these gutters is the passage of time and space, where the sequence is and where the action develops. Perhaps the Guaman Poma images, which may be considered proto-comics, are the very early

examples of the various intellectual and cultural “border crossings” pertinent to contact zone theory today (Strine 1993; Mendoza 1994).



Figures 1 & 2: Images from <http://www.nwe.ufl.edu/~stripp/2504/pratt.html>

Pratt says that Guaman Poma’s second letter is an autoethnographic text, one “in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them....that the so-defined others construct *in response to* or in dialogue with those texts” (Pratt 2002, pgs. 5-6). She sees Guaman Poma’s hybrid language and even his attempts at writing in general as “oppositional representation” (p.7). Guaman Poma writes using the language of his oppressors but also does not allow them to cancel out his authentic voice. Many of the best graphic novels are autobiographical, and many cross over into Pratt’s conceptualization of autoethnography as well. For example, *Maus* (1986) is not just Art

Spiegelman's biography or a retelling of his father's, but a discourse situated in the languages and cultures of first-generation immigrants, their American children, and various perspectives of family and world (see Chute 2006). Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) is told from the perspective of an Iranian female who has immigrated to France and has a complex, multicultural worldview based on her experiences as insider and stranger. Her words may not be hybrid constructs, but her perspectives are.

Self As Case Study and X-Men Comics as Exemplars

In respect for Pratt's focus on autobiographical texts, I state readily that two of the earliest comic books I can remember reading on my own, *Uncanny X-Men* #196 (1985) and *Classic X-Men* #1 (1986), when I was eight and nine years old, respectively, are also excellent examples of contact zone theory via visual texts. These two comics helped me recognize and explore power relations at a young age and influenced my perceptions of equity and equality. While the X-Men series has been exemplary throughout its history, I do not claim that every super-hero comics or every X-Men comic is suited for exploring specific contact zone principles as these two (though I do posit that any comics text *can* open up discussions of import in contact zone theory, even super-hero comics, of which the X-Men titles are examples and which have often been considered "the lowest genre of a low form"). These two issues are particularly salient in my personal development, though. In addition, these issues show contact zones at work in a school setting.

The X-men series features an ensemble of super-powered mutants, or people born with latent powers and abilities gained at the onset of puberty that sets them apart from other humans.

As such, mutants are outcasts from most parts of society, misunderstood and perceived of as a threat by the status quo. Professor Charles Xavier is a mutant himself, and also the headmaster of a school for mutants. In these comics, his recruitment processes are laced with ideals of acceptance, safety, and changing perspectives. His School for Gifted Youngsters in Westchester, NY, is a place where his students can meet the challenges that would face them for the rest of their lives, feel safe to clash with populist notions of equality, equity, race, gender, religion, and each other, and grapple with multiple perspectives from students of various ages, origins and experiences. In short, Charles Xavier's is an institution of critical pedagogy, a school where the contact zone is almost always engaged.

In the two comics I have mentioned, students at the school often inform one another's growing sense of identity and place in a complex, multicultural world. Notions of gender, religion, nationality, loyalty, and even cooperation are tested as the characters realize the asymmetries in their various power dynamics and those affecting them outside school grounds. What is bothersome to Pratt, as is implicit in her conversation about Willy and his baseball cards, is that, unlike the Xavier Institute, contemporary schooling often fails to provide adequate opportunities to examine such relationships. So, a study of the contact zone in the X-Men series can extrapolate to a study of actual school dynamics if teachers care to examine them overtly with students, which Pratt and I feel they should. One way of overtly examining school dynamics might be to ask students to trace their own "schooling histories" via creating autoethnographic writings prior to or after examining a comics text. For example, with pre-service education students taking an all-graphic novel- themed section of Young Adult Literature, I asked students to journal daily on the graphic novels they read. They began and ended their journaling by

writing about their notions of comics as teaching tools before and after the class. This discursive safe house of student writing helped students to open up in class discussion, even though they knew the professor was a strong proponent of the form in school settings. The revelation that many of them were not allowed to read or never considered reading comics in their pre-college schooling years also helped us to form the basis for how we needed to approach the topic. We didn't read any X-Men comics for that course, but doing so would have brought portrayals of school dynamics even more to the fore of our thinking.

It is important to take a brief aside to mention that intrinsic to autoethnographic texts is transculturation. Pratt says of transculturations that they are “processes whereby members of subordinated groups or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt 2002, p.9). She also posits that the “pedagogical arts of the contact zone” include “exercises in storytelling and in identifying with ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others’ experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms)” (Pratt 2002, p.17). Since comics and their readers have always seemed to be considered on the counter- or fringe-culture, the argument could be made that any modern sequential art narrative is worthy of study by means of the contact zone. Comics’ and graphic novels’ artists, writers and readers are subordinated within the standards of the culture at large, and creators’ work has often been considered crude and vernacular (see e.g., Wertham, 1954; Marsh and Millard 2001; Heer and Worcester, 2003).

To be sure, there are many examples of transculturation in even the most popular superhero comics. For example, Superman can be read as creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s

transculturated and re-appropriated adolescent response to feeling dominated by a culture that respected only narrow definitions of manliness, being Jewish, and even being American (both were teenagers and children of Jewish immigrants). Furthermore, Superman is the ultimate American immigrant, hailing from another planet and acculturated by Kansas farmers who adopt him when he is an infant (see Hadju 2008). Even if one chooses to ignore the influences of the creators' cultures, Superman offers an excellent paragon of transculturation as he finds his place on Earth while exploring his unique heritage as well.

Reversing the perspective from the character to that of those he influences, one could claim that, as a super-man, his interpretations of right and wrong and proper cultural behavior actually become the dominant standards and that those who feel his wrath or sense of justice are subordinated. This leads to the intriguing idea that the villains he faces must "select and invent from materials transmitted by" (Pratt 2002, p.9) Superman, the dominant cultural force. Superman's one weakness – and a material often procured by his enemies to subvert his dominance – is kryptonite, an element transmitted from his home planet upon its destruction.

That so many early comics creators are Jewish¹ is also an area in which we can see comics taking the dominant American culture and using it to their own ends and means while at the same time intermingling with and even creating artifacts of that dominant culture. The X-Men series created by Jewish artists Stan Lee and Jack Kirby can be read as an allegory of racism, and Marvel comics basically built their empire on stories featuring super-powered misfits, those who railed against the norms of society in one way or another. It might seem so at

¹ The aforementioned Seigel and Shuster, and Art Spiegelman; Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, Stan Lee and many others.

first glance, but it is actually far from ironic that such paragons of “referential, masculinist ethos” (Pratt 2002, p.3) as comic book heroes transculturate so well. We recognize transculturation and reappropriation in music, slang, and other “counter” cultures (consider the use of “nigger” or “dyke” or “bitch,” all words that can be seen as insults when used by the dominant culture but which have been appropriated as terms of endearment or badges of honor by the sublimated groups themselves, here African Americans and women, respectively).

Returning to the X-Men series of comics, *Uncanny X-Men # 196* (Claremont and Romita, Jr. 1985) wonderfully illustrates this potential for comics to do the same. In one scene, Kitty Pryde, a naive, curly-haired teenage student at the Xavier Institute (who reminded me of my mother when I first read the comic) and fledgling X-Man is approached by a group of young men intent on doing harm to mutants. The group is led by Phil, an African American. “You a *mutie*?” he asks belligerently (“mutie” is a racist term that the comics use to describe anyone who is a “mutant,” someone born with special powers). She replies, “Gee I dunno Phil, are you a *nigger*?” Even as an eight-year-old in rural North Carolina, I knew this was a major scene. Here there are two students from different cultures and races (Phil is not a mutant) using language that when transculturated or re-appropriated is sometimes considered a thing of pride, but when used

in the dominant culture's sense of the word, is highly hurtful and pejorative.

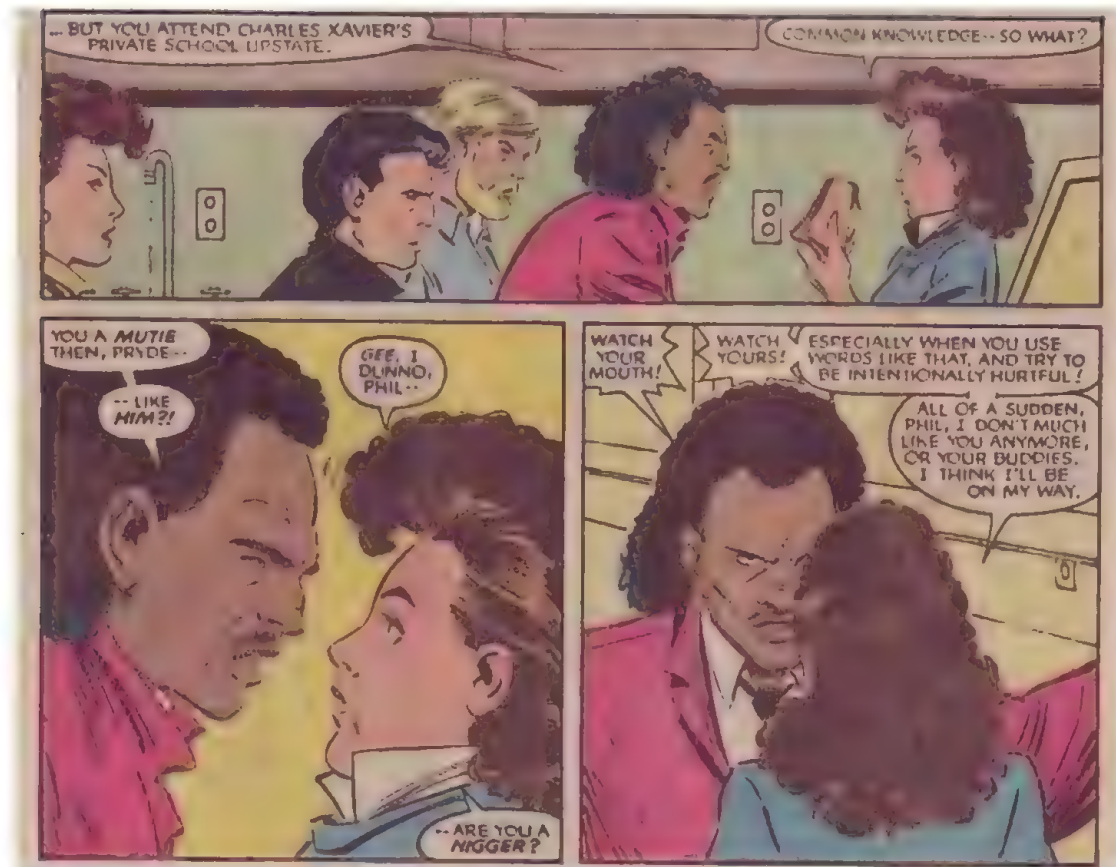


Figure 4: Kitty and Phil Exchange Equally Hurtful Terms

Kitty and Phil are both members of different cultural groups often considered marginal (mutants on the one hand and African Americans on the other) but attempt to goad one another by using the dominant culture's racist connotation of the words. There are no mutants in real life, of course, and this fact might provide teachers a means by which to explore the concept of transculturation via this particular example with the necessary distance: In this regard, "mutie" can become a linguistic safe house in which students can explore the hateful power of words. This scene between Kitty and Phil is an outstanding example of students meeting, clashing and grappling with cultural forces. As a young reader, the bolded words immediately showed me that

I was supposed to equate mutant's struggles with those of African Americans; certainly my Southern roots had already exposed me to that "real-life" racial slur, and I understood Kitty and her compatriots in a deeper, more empathetic manner than ever after reading this scene.

That scene is just one of the critical literacy moments in this issue. In another subplot, hero Nightcrawler questions his Catholic faith, having just encountered the Beyonder, a force that seems to be able to create and destroy at will. The contact with a godlike figure has him clashing with notions of religion and grappling with remaining faithful in the sight of such a force. Having come face-to-face with a viewpoint, a life world so opposed to his own, Nightcrawler is in agony. He must grapple with the experience, finding a way to resolve conflicts while respecting alternative possibilities. He is, in effect, being taken to school in a manner consistent with unsettling but important "big issue" conflicts that Pratt wants to see at the center of the classroom and with which she feels students must engage to better understand their worlds and the people that inhabit them. Teachers could use this example to open up discussions of how various religious tenets intersect and conflict, just as the example with Kitty provides a means of exploring racism.



Figure 5: Nightcrawler Questions His Faith

The issue ends when Rachel, a telepathic and telekinetic, “hears” Kitty’s cries once Phil attacks. Phil fires a shot, but Rachel turns the bullet around and aims it at his head. Magneto, the master of magnetism and a Holocaust survivor who saw his family killed by Nazi forces, stops the bullet and holds it steady at Phil’s head, asking Rachel if she wants to act like those who kill

for hate. Rachel's choice is one that many of us have had to make: sink to the level of those that hate, or rise above the temptation while having to acknowledge that there will always be those who dislike us simply because of who they feel we are. While Rachel may not feel the transformation she would like based on her conflict-laden lesson, she learns a powerful one that is applicable to every student in every classroom in the world – especially if teachers make room for discussions thereof, though difficult they may be.



Figure 6: Magneto Offers Rachel an Ethical Choice Despite Her Anger

An earlier scene even depicted Wolverine, a small, thick-lipped man with a gruff attitude (who reminded me of my father) teaching Kitty that his cigars aren't for kids. He lets her puff, choke and tear up, then lets her go on her way, having learned from experience that smoking isn't for her. Kitty confronts Wolverine's life choices directly. While Pratt may not have approved of her

smoking, Kitty's courage in trying to experience life from another's interests, preferences, and point of view is indicative of the courage Pratt feels students must have to engage the contact zone. Traditional schooling seems to inhibit taking risks. Contact zone theory suggests they must happen on some scale in the classroom every day for education to have social, critical worth. In this one issue of a super-hero comic book, there are several contact zones engaged at once; issues of race, equality, hate, health, and even faith are addressed. But, then again, these are students from the exclusive Xavier School for Gifted Youngsters, not just any public school.



Figure 7: Wolverine Tutors Kitty Through “Education via Experience”

Speech acts, power relations, and unsolicited oppositional discourse do not necessarily occur independently of the ideas presented in the preceding paragraphs. Speech acts, in Pratt’s mind, tend to be homogenous and monolingual, representations of the voices of power. In the traditionalist classroom, this can be represented as the teacher’s voice, which may have a tendency to dominate. Yet, Pratt suggests speech acts need to become just the opposite, and making them so will move dialogue and the classroom towards the contact zone. In comparison with comics, when someone of another language other than English speaks in a comic, it is often bracketed with a note such as “translated from Russian” at the bottom of the panel. This helps the reader to understand the intonation, language styles, and perspectives of the character, a *deus-ex-machina* means of offering a slight understanding of an otherwise possibly incomprehensible speech act. Pratt suggests that within the various concepts of the contact zone, communication must become more open, more multicultural and multilingual; dialectical just as it is dialogic. This means that working to “translate” individuals’ statements is important and necessary work. The power relations need to be renegotiated away from the discourse of the teacher to the multilayered discourse of the classroom community.

Again the X-Men series is useful in exploring this point. In *Giant-Sized X-Men #1*, which I first read reprinted in 1987’s *Classic X-Men #1*, when Charles Xavier must quickly form a new group of mutants to save his original seven students from a grave danger, he gathers a German acrobat, a Russian farmer, a Canadian soldier, an Irishman who was a former enemy, an African goddess, a Native American strongman, and a Japanese aristocrat. He takes them quite literally to school, to his Xavier Institute, where he will teach them along with his other students/heroes.

Xavier knows that his students can be agents of change when properly educated. Pratt holds this supposition for her students as well. Indeed, it is the *raison d'être* for her theory. Upon their first encounters, the professor telepathically teaches them to speak English so that they might better understand one another. Yet, they retain their native languages and often speak small phrases in their native tongues. Even though they can communicate because their teacher gave them the linguistic tools, the first few years of the series after this event was largely about their coming to terms with the levels of diversity among them, the varying linguistic and cultural traditions, individual attitudes, and, of course, how they fit in with the pre-existing school culture once the original seven students were saved and returned to the institute. Team leader and American Cyclops must deal with the Canadian Wolverine's bad attitude and constant questioning of his leadership skills, not to mention Wolverine's attraction to Cyclops' girlfriend. Five of the original seven members leave the team and school because they feel they have been displaced by the older, more rugged new recruits. The remaining members must learn to look past Nightcrawler's devilish appearance (he has features associated with that of a demon – pointed ears, tail and teeth; glowing eyes; cloven feet. He was about to be murdered for this before Xavier whisked him away) and recognize him as the charming person he is. Nightcrawler must resolve the tensions he feels between his strict Catholic faith and being on a team with those like Wolverine who have killed in cold blood.

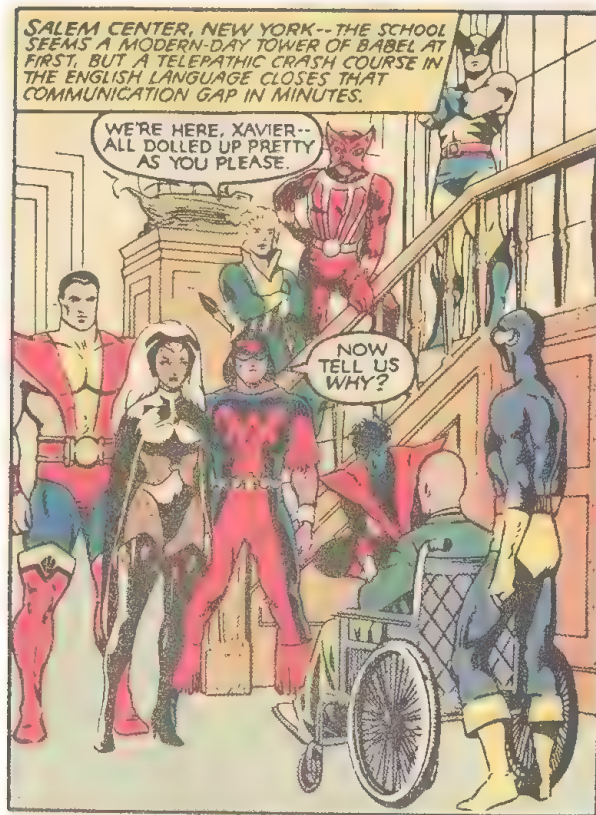


Figure 8: The Multicultural Cast of the X-Men

Before they can come to understandings, they have to learn to speak the same language, but, metaphorically speaking, rarely are they successful in their earliest encounters. Their speech acts must be redefined, power relations must be worked out, and oppositional unsolicited discourse, when it arises, must be handled directly and effectively. The X-Men are in a school setting engulfed in multiple contact zones, as are all students. There are ample opportunities to meet, clash, and grapple, both culturally and literally, in battle training for Xavier's mutants, in specific lessons, and even among peers in social interactions. Real-life secondary school and college is somewhat similar (sports or physical education might be the real world analogue to the X-Men's physical training, of course), as cultures often come into contact and conflict. Pratt acknowledges these zones and the speech acts, power relations, and oppositional discourses

within them as existing in every classroom. Acknowledging their presence and crafting means by which they can be examined is a necessity for the teacher, who must allow students the opportunities to develop the skills to “speak the same language” – only without Xavier’s gift of telepathy! Examining speech acts, power relations and acknowledging unsolicited oppositional discourse is not always a comfortable situation, but one that helps “every single text” stand “in specific historical relationships to the students” with a wide “range and variety” of relations at work (Pratt 2002, p.16). The X-Men series offers excellent examples of these three constructs.

I hope to have illustrated how comics and contact zone theory have strong connective tissue. Contact zone precepts can be applied to study contemporary comics, even super-hero comics, and *even proto-comics* because – despite several decades worth of apprehension and distrust for the form among sub-sets of society, including teachers – sequential art and education have a long, if not nuanced, history of supporting one another in one form or another. That “co-operation” often means supporting specific notions of power, voice, and culture as well. Texts in which school is central to the setting, such as in the X-Men books, offer particularly strong instances for examining contact zone constructs, but they aren’t the only texts to do so. Further, books, films, and other visual arts set in schools (such as the Harry Potter series and Norman Rockwell paintings) are just as rich for an examination via the contact zone lens. Any textual representation of a construct, here schooling, naturally tropes or reifies aspects of the concept represented, but the most important conversations teachers and students might have is to consider the dynamics and tensions inherent in these texts to critique the social texts and contexts of their own schooling situations, their past pedagogical experiences and their current ones.

Indeed, questions such as “What is the dominant voice in this classroom?” and “Are there safe houses established in class such that I can speak my mind and be heard?” are not just for Xavier’s students. They are important for any class at any academic level.

Contemporary Lenses and Precedent Pedagogical Texts

The New London Group’s Courtney B. Cazden states, “one of the central ideas of the Multiliteracies argument is that negotiating across differences is now a life-and-death matter, and literacy pedagogy has to play its part in developing the discourse skills that such negotiation requires” (2000, p.265). For Cazden, Pratt’s contact zone construct is a suitable metaphor for contemporary education and includes each literacy component espoused by the New London Group: Situated Practice in the larger class; overt Instruction in ‘exercises’ and ‘ground rules’; Critical Framing in ‘critique, parody and comparison’; Transformed Practice in ‘experiments in transculturation and collaborative work’ (p.266). Just as I was making text-to-self connections as I saw my parents in Kitty Pryde and Wolverine; just as I was making text-to-world connections when I learned to equate “mutie” with other racial slurs, there are students in our classrooms making familiar sociocultural connections with comics, graphic novels, and manga. Just like the connections I made as an early reader via those X-Men comics, the connections are far from trivial. The issues are socio-cultural and sociopolitical in scope and may even get at the values students and teachers embrace in their classrooms concerning literary worth, gender, ability, and more. Teachers must accept comics and graphic novels into their classrooms, not just for the sake of meeting the goal of becoming “multimodal,” but because of the form’s potential to help students meet, clash, and grapple with the issues that do and will define them as people. Cazden

states, “We all live in the contact zone and have to take responsibility for negotiating within it” (p.266). Overtly integrating comics into the classroom and engaging in discourse with our students about the issues they raise, asking students to consider those issues in terms of their own education and the values often placed on “appropriate” school conversation and even “appropriate” school texts, considering the unique ways in which graphic novels engage in hot-button issues, and perhaps even asking students to engage in the comics-making process themselves to express difficult, multifaceted points of view are all ways in which teachers might utilize comics in the classroom.

There are some precedents for discussing comics and graphic novels in relation to contact zone theory both in the secondary and college classrooms, and the scholarship on secondary teachers’ and students’ interactions with comics in the contact zone is gaining more attention. In *Reinventing English*, which explores contact zone pedagogy in the secondary English classroom, John Gaughan mentions using *Maus* as part of his unit “War and Voice – Speaking Up,” but *Maus* is a quick point of reference to him before he moves on to Wiesel’s *Night*. He mentions that his students find the form appealing, that the book was more impressive than he thought it would be (Gaughan 2001, p.84), and that he gives his students a cartooning option once he asks them to write about the book (p.85). Andrea Freud Loewenstein’s article “Confronting Stereotypes: *Maus* in Crown Heights” (1998) is another early precedent of the form being used in tandem with contact zone principles, but Loewenstein utilizes the text to examine her and her students’ specific classroom and cultural exigency. Loewenstein used *Maus* to help her Crown Heights college students explore the tensions and violence that had recently come to a head between African-Caribbean Americans and Lubavitcher Jewish residents. *Maus* “pushed [her

students] to interrogate their own stereotyping as the authors as well as the victims of prejudice” (p.400). She says, “a remote attitude is simply not possible with *Maus*. One of Spiegelman’s achievements is his constant interrogation of his own authorial position” (Loewenstein 1998, p.402). Transculturation, oppositional discourse, and power relations are clearly at work within *Maus* as Art (as the author and as a character in the book) tries to feel his way through life as the second-generation American son of Vladek, an immigrant and holocaust survivor who also happens to be a formidable oppressive force via his obsessive-compulsive and sometimes stereotypical behavior (Vladek hoards things, for example, and is a miserly spender). Vladek’s tales of survival offer a narrative string that intertwines with Art’s own writing about his desires to make sense of their relationship.

Loewenstein also argues that the text helps introduce students to “what Paulo Freire and other writers have called ‘critical literacy,’ an ideology, a language, and discourse that will enable them to see themselves as more than isolated individuals suffering from some combination of bad luck and unworthiness, but instead as part of a larger system of injustice” (Loewenstein, 1998, p. 401). She says her students often give the text too much authority, often distancing themselves from untouchable authors, but *Maus* makes this distancing difficult since Art critiques himself as a reliable storyteller. Spiegelman’s own critical examination of self and world via text helps her students see that they can do the same.

In previous writings, I have mentioned the contact zone lens as one that can help teacher see comics as texts that can help transform a classroom into a more critical, self-aware sphere of learning, just as Pratt wants. In “Transforming English with Graphic Novels: Moving Toward our ‘Optimus Prime,’” (Carter 2007b) I explicitly call for educators to consider the contact zone

as a lens through which they may study weighty issues and mention several graphic novel titles suitable for crafting contact zones. In “Teaching Watchmen in the Wake of 9/11” (Carter 2009), I talk about how scaffolding to create prior-knowledge on topics from the 1980s helped produce instructional safe houses for freshman composition students about to embark on a reading of *Watchmen*, just as the journals with my pre-service teachers in the YA Lit class helped create discursive safe houses. I have also detailed how using comics in the classroom can raise the ire of those with power in school settings (Carter 2007a). For example, my attempts to teach *Maus* to gifted eight-graders were blocked by a central office administrator in my school district even though my principal had signed off on ordering a class set of the texts. Even when I used to teach comics composition processes to gifted students as young as sixth-graders, I would often have students ask questions like “aren’t we a little old for this?” or “shouldn’t we be doing something more important?” Their inquiries were laced with value judgments about literary merit, age-appropriate curriculum, and even composition, but also with excitement, as if to say, “Is it OK for us to be enjoying something like this?” Their probing discourse revealed them accepting the status quo notion of comics as “low,” and therefore not for gifted students such as themselves. Yet, by using the language and ideas of the dominant culture, they were also seeking a challenge of it (speech acts and transculturation!). These value judgments were revisited once students began actually creating their own comics and saw how much critical thinking and process work goes into doing so. Through work, their attempts at transculturation carried through to reveal new attitudes on comics art. Similar attitudes were revealed in the YA Lit class as students’ pre-comics reading journals often expressed reserve about comics in the classroom, but post-reading journals at the end of the term revealed at least a willingness to consider them as pedagogical

tools. Another way of looking at examples from my own experiences is that with the sixth graders, and to some extent with the college students as well, I was able to be the hegemonic voice of power with those students, like I could not be with the administrator from the central office. Indeed, as a teacher aware and accepting of contact zone principles, much of my work is influencing students to transculture -- to at least *consider* my point of view -- without dominating their discourse or completely destroying their critical, and often times informative, dissent. I don't want to create safe houses where they can share speech acts of oppositional discourse only to blow over those houses with hurricane-force counterpoints, even if I have the ability to do so. I try, instead, to tease out their opinions and offer information that will allow *them* to transform their thoughts, not me.

Most recently in print, Michael Bitz (2009) discusses the contact zone in relation to his four-year qualitative study of students engaged in the creation of manga through an afterschool program called the Comic Book Project. He says that whereas traditional schooling had failed his student in many ways, most particularly in valuing specific forms of knowledge and experience over others, the program allowed them to bridge the divides of the lives they wanted to lead and their school lives. Bitz says,

These teenagers were butting against what they were “supposed” to be, and all the terms that a stranger on the subway might have applied to them at first sight: thug, gangbanger, gangsta ... the list of derogatory epithets could fill pages. By embracing manga, the teens entered what Mary Louise Pratt has defined as a “contact zone,” where a person meets, clashes, and grapples with accepted societal norms” (2009, p.15).

So, there is some evidence that teachers at the college and secondary levels are beginning to see the potential for comics art to illustrate education in the contact zone *and* to overtly examine those interconnections.

Concluding Thoughts

Further, comics studies continues to meet, clash, and grapple with ways to extend basic conversations about comics' literary worth when exploring with students and colleagues why comics might be utilized in a classroom setting. Charles Hatfield talks of boundaries and borders in "How to Read A..." (2008) and how comics, which he sees as "interdisciplinary" (as do I), require the "hopping of professional borders and the intermingling of theories and methods drawn from many different disciplines" (p.129). Considering comics' place in the curriculum attends to what Hatfield calls "boundary-dissolving" (p.130) in terms of what often constitutes literary study in that it offers the potential for accepting texts and forms into the classroom that might once have been relegated to outside reading at best. Thierry Groensteen (2007) has recently articulated a theory of comics in which he talks about the iconic solidarity of the system of comics, one in which the form is defined by a unique spatio-topical relationship. Basically, he says that images within panels are situated in the particular moment in time and in the narrative, but also contribute to the overall form of the narrative. Further, certain panels may be "braided" together in terms of their importance and in the readers' comprehension of their shared content. Groensteen states accurately that in comics, all images are always already framed, not only by the borders that separate them but also by the page, the borders of the book or pamphlet that covers it, and by the cognition of the reader. Hatfield and Groensteen's works reveal that comics, just by being engaged by a cognizant person, are already in social contact and conflict with their

readers, already in discourse, jostling ideas of high-low, border crossing, overstepping boundaries, and constantly asking readers to reconsider the “always already” value judgment.

As I mentioned earlier, in super-hero comics, often when heroes meet for the first time, “the first interaction with everyone of one’s kind is a physical tussle” (Wolk 2007, p.101). It appears to me that serious study of comics in the classroom, encompassing both what they are and what they can convey, already accounts for a discursive opportunity to enter the contact zone, if only teachers accept comics’ potentials. In an era when secondary teachers are asked to be powerless while simultaneously super-human, we can’t lose sight of our students’ need for building understanding in new, multiliterate ways. Therefore, students must be allowed the opportunity to meet, clash, and grapple with comics art in the English Language Arts classroom and other school settings such as at university. Doing so not only expands their knowledge of comics and their pedagogical and social relevancies and potentials, but offers a means to engage in critical conversations about the nature of their own past and current schooling exigencies.





Figures 9 & 10: Multiple Contact Zones at Work in Xavier's School

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SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Comics in the Contact Zone*

Article 4

1-1-2010

This is Not Your Father's Thor: Using Comics to Make Mythology Meaningful

Nick Kremer

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Kremer, Nick (2010) "This is Not Your Father's Thor: Using Comics to Make Mythology Meaningful," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 4.

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THIS IS NOT YOUR FOREFATHER'S THOR:

USING COMICS TO MAKE MYTHOLOGY MEANINGFUL

BY NICK KREMER

A Call to Adventure

It was my first year of teaching, and as part of a fourth-quarter Mythology unit in my 9th grade Language Arts class, we were reading aloud adapted versions of the old Norse tales from Snorri's *Prose Edda*. This particular class period witnessed the contest between Thor, god of thunder, and the giant-king Utgard-Loki. Our hero was not faring well – he had already failed to empty a normal-sized drinking horn and lift up a mere cat, and was currently struggling mightily in his wrestling match with, of all competitors, a crippled old nurse. Suddenly, one of my “free-thinking” students blurted out a “question”:

“Why do we have to read this stuff?”

A true believer in the Socratic arts, I responded, “Why *do* we read this stuff?” in the hopes that sparks of allegory would magically begin to ignite behind the glassy eyes of my students, as they would think their way into the not-so-obvious recognition that Thor was metaphysically putting up a fairly commendable showing against the fury of nature, the laws of physics, and the inevitability of mortality – battles still relevant to any human in any culture today.

To be fair, something *did* ignite in my students.

“Because he has to teach it, stupid! It’s in the curriculum.”

“There’s like a list of stories that like everybody reads, and if you don’t know them, people, like, think you’re dumb.”

A hearty discussion followed about whether such a list does indeed exist, and who makes that list if it does, and whether or not we mere mortals can argue with those decisions. Finally, I interjected: “So somebody put this story on *their* list. Why?”

“Because it’s really hard to understand. Y’know, it’s...deep.”

“Because it was important back then, so that makes it important now.”

“It tells you something about the people who told it.”

There was the “aha!” moment I was looking for. Feigning incredulousness, I asked, “You mean literature can tell us about *culture*?” Despite the lackluster response to my (obvious) wit, here was the springboard into full-fledged, authentic cultural analysis I had been looking for, ironically all started by the off-hand comment of one less-than-enthusiastic stu...

“But who cares about other people’s culture?”

Socrates be damned.

He had a point, though. The stand-by response, something to the tune of “because many different people inhabit this earth, so it’s important to learn to respect values that are different from your own,” [my secondary-school version of Mary Louise Pratt’s influential Contact Zone pedagogy, a philosophy that espouses learning to identify with the ideas and attitudes of foreign cultures] seemed to carry less weight than usual here, since the Norse ceased to be a civilization centuries ago. Actually, most of the classical myths included in our textbook, were, in fact, remnants of cultures no longer recognizable in our contemporary world. Certainly there is value in historical inquiry and anthropological preservation, and as Pratt would argue, classrooms can

be used “as social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (1991, p.34), but with an endless amount of cultural source material available, how *had* the selection process been determined that resulted in such a predominately archaic (not to mention European) narrative set? I was quickly becoming a skeptic myself...

Why choose one “dead” mythology over another? Why choose a dead mythology at all? Instead, why not interpret the myths of a present-day culture, so there could be immediate relevance in that study? In fact, if identifying, analyzing, and discussing cultural values is such an important endeavor, why wasn’t any time being spent in the classroom doing the same thing for my students’ own contemporary society and the many sub-cultures found within? How could the myths of other civilizations be more important than the myths of one’s own?

No wonder I wasn’t getting any buy-in! And then the epiphany hit me: to justify incorporating a mythology unit into my Language Arts classroom, I needed to find a way to consciously link discussions of selected classical myths to my students’ own present-day cultural experiences. That is not to say that I intended to eliminate multicultural texts from my curriculum – far from it, since my very rationale for studying mythology was to embrace a Contact Zone pedagogy – I simply realized that in order for my students to effectively engage with other societies’ cultural narratives, they needed to first practice modeling those skills within texts from their own rich mythology, and thus *I* needed to add narratives to our reading list that came directly from those “local” experiences.

Supernatural Aid

This second task – finding present-day mythology – proved more difficult. Contemporary mythology is hard to define, especially within a society as media-saturated as our own. Though famous comparative mythologists such as Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye attempted to find common ground among the past and present, other scholars point out important distinctions. Mircea Eliade, Roland Barthes, and others point out that elements like the alienating modern spirit; the emphasis on science/logic; the availability of recordable, instantaneous communication technology; and the effects of globalization all add new dimensions to present-day existence that make it impossible to examine our mythology through exactly the same lenses that mythographers use to view those of ancient cultures. Thus, it is extremely difficult to say what makes a myth a myth in contemporary American society. Is it form: does it have to have Campbell's famous hero's journey and archetypal symbols? Is it content: does it need to teach a lesson, a "higher purpose?" Is it popularity: must a majority of people invest a substantial amount of time in its proliferation?

Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are not easy to discern. But real-world decisions had to be made, so philosophical inaction was not an option. With Thor on my mind, I decided that a good starting place would be to examine the recurring hero narratives that have flourished in our own country over the past half-dozen decades. Extremely rich source material for this exercise, I knew, was contained in the American comic book, a medium that is arguably our country's most original literary form. The super-heroes of my youth – indeed, of my

parents' and grandparents' youth – were still alive and well on the bookshelves and TV screens of America, making them prime candidates for my initial inquiry.

Before exploring mythology in comics, though, I had to come to terms with using them in the classroom, thanks to a lifetime's worth of authoritarian voices proclaiming their intellectual inferiority and academic unsuitability. Texts like Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* and Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, however, brought me pedagogical peace of mind and newfound respect for the medium I myself used to love as an adolescent. Eisner, McCloud, and many more, assert that images, like words, can be intentionally juxtaposed to create meaning, and that readers must use context clues, inferences, and background knowledge in order to comprehend the messages contained within such multimedia texts. As such, comics are not alternatives to reading – they are the gateway to an entirely new facet of literacy. They offer a multitude of unique possibilities for education, including student opportunities for interdisciplinary growth, multiple modes of learning, engaging vocabulary development, and critical deconstruction of a designer's intentions through visual media.

Better yet, the more I learned about comic books, the more amazed I became at how insulated they were from the modern mythology problems stated above. Between the shadows of two World Wars in the 1930s, when the rest of American literature began to plunge into the spirit of modernism – a worldview that truth is relative, meaning is ambiguous, communication is faulty, and social groups are doomed to deteriorate into isolated individuals – a new medium, comics, was born in idealistic opposition. Superman and a legion of equally heroic comic book characters became symbols of resilience, optimism, patriotism, and moral fortitude to a

population mired in the depths of depression. They offered an alternative to the cynicism and isolation of modernity.

As Campbell points out, heroes (like Superman) have always united. Myth is religious in that sense; it aspires towards the spiritual side of humanity, asking us to champion the metaphysical, to understand truth through metaphor and story, to desperately attempt to create common identity and experience. In the ancient cultures whose narratives make up our classroom Mythology textbooks, religion and culture were inherently intertwined: Thor was both hero and god. But in recent civilizations, the cold, concrete logic of modernism/nihilism has always been the direct antithesis of myth. So when Captain America punched Adolf Hitler in the jaw on the cover of his debut issue in 1941, he might as well have been throwing a right hook at an ideology, too. Mainstream America would not wholly accept the pessimism of modernity, and as a counter-culture, a mythological Golden Age of Comics reached its height.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before the modern spirit did, indeed, creep its way into this young medium (as it has all others), but by the rise of anti-heroes and psychological realism in comics of the 1980s, there were already decades of rich cultural history to buffer its effects. The characters, the conventions, the community of readers – all had already been established through ongoing, interconnected episodes through the years; so ironically, modernizing comics only served to make the mythology found within these narratives *more* popular and encompassing, not less.

Indeed, it is this serialized nature of super-hero comics that makes them more like the myths of ancient cultures than any other medium in our society. From the moment a human first discovered the ability to write language down and record it for future audiences, mythology

changed forever, because there was no longer the need for oral tradition within a community to perpetuate it. Stories could now be told (read) in isolation by oneself, and could be preserved without being retold by subsequent storytellers. It wasn't until the invention of Gutenberg's printing press, though – with its ability to easily mass-produce recorded texts – that oral tradition truly began to be replaced by the written word, and myths gave way to literature.

That is not to say that literature can't be mythic; it just means that trying to define what constitutes a myth in literature-based societies is more difficult than for cultures that relied upon oral tradition. Because members in those communities had to actively work to preserve their narratives, the stories that survived “the test of time,” that outlived their own cultures, were clearly the tales held with the highest popular regard. Furthermore, the organic, “living” act of retelling those narratives within the community with each passing generation ensured that a vivid mark of that generation's cultural values would be found within the continuous mythology.

Today, though, while parents, teachers, and community leaders certainly influence the literature read by the youth in their charges and often require them to read the texts that had the most profound effects on their own upbringings, stories are no longer retold with the passage of time. Instead, they are preserved exactly as the original author intended the story to be told. This is mythically problematic in that it freezes the narrative in a certain time period in a culture's history, rather than allowing it to evolve as society does. The stories become literature instead of real myths; they become artifacts of a given time and author. Readers outside that tradition can still meaningfully interact with these texts, but not in the authentic, organic manner that communities which utilized oral tradition experienced.

Furthermore, this preservation has made it possible for a vast number of stories to coexist instead of compete for viability, as they would have had to do in societies that relied upon oral tradition. Technology and the increased leisure time that accompanies its development has led to the creation of a money-making entertainment industry with a mass quantity of texts that often appeal to values that will yield the greatest profit margins. Technology has allowed for an overabundance of narratives, because every piece of literature is recorded in physical form, be it a book, a DVD, or a data file. These texts are easily accessible to future generations and to the rest of the world. Due to radio, then TV, and now the Internet, individuals have essentially instantaneous contact with any “myth” they wish to examine, from anywhere or any era. And because participants can read literature in the isolation of their homes, without the interaction of their local communities, the possibilities for consensus-building that are essential to myth-making have become increasingly scarce. Perhaps these two factors – a lack of community engagement in continually reshaping myths and an overabundance of multicultural narrative material – are why the vast majority of myths contained in mythology textbooks like the one in my classroom are limited to ancient cultures.

American super-hero comics, however, have presented a unique alternative to this modern dilemma. While the individual books themselves are published literature - artifacts of a given moment - the characters and worlds found within are timeless. The episodic nature of comic book publication has had two important effects: it has created a community of fans with ritualized behavior and a public gathering place (buying the monthly issue at the local comic shop, discussing the latest plot developments, etc.) and has allowed for the source material, the heroes’ sagas, to be expanded or reinvented within each of the last seven decades. Series have

been re-launched for contemporary appeal; characters have been revived from cancellation or death itself; alternate realities have been created (from “what if” scenarios of the past to dystopian nightmares of the future); content has been made both more mature and more “kid-friendly” in simultaneous publications of the same storylines for different audiences; and the original medium of comics itself has expanded as popular narratives have been adapted for film, television, video games, music, toys, clothing, and other merchandise. In this sense, Superman, or Spider-Man, or any of the other colorful cast of characters in American comic book history have transcended recorded literature: they are not owned by any one author, their stories not confined to any one publication. They are constantly re-told and re-imagined, year after year, generation after generation, a living manifestation of the culture that gives them value. They have become genuine mythology, once again trumping the confines of a skeptical modernity that suggests the impossibility of that achievement in such an era.

Crossing the Threshold

That was the revelation. Now came the challenge: finding which comics to incorporate into my curriculum and how to teach them.

My first foray into using comics in the classroom was as bumpy as Thor’s failed contests with Utgard-Loki. With no curriculum, no modeling, no resources, and a constant fear of criticism from being a young, progressive teacher in a conservative community, I haphazardly tried a few lessons with my first class, but ultimately came to the conclusion that the only way this would work was if I was “all in.” So, during the following summer, I put my best arguments

forward and applied for a National Education Association mini-grant to purchase a classroom set of graphic novels – and received it. Now, there was no turning back...

The First Trial: Contemporary Literature

I spent the rest of the summer immersing myself in as many graphic novels as possible, researching and reading the best writers and artists the medium had to offer. There are many great stories well-worth the relatively short amount of time one needs to invest in them. Finding the right text to use with students, though, is not entirely the same feat. Some of comics' finest – Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, Neal Gaiman's *Sandman* series, Bill Willingham's *Fables* – are best left out of a K-12 mythology unit, not because of their relevance, but because their mature content is likely to cause legitimate obstacles for inclusion. Conversely, there is a plethora of titles that do work, but with considerably smaller thematic scope and literary gravitas.

Luckily, I found several titles that fit comfortably between these two extremes; ones that possess maturity without risk and are ripe for mythological dissection. Furthermore, they draw from iconic characters that are easily recognizable in popular culture today, and thus have the potential to be extremely engaging for adolescents. I have provided a brief plot synopsis, a list of the cultural themes contained within the text that can easily become the basis for classroom dialogue, and a short discussion of how each text can be applied in a mythology unit. With these aims, I present the following texts for curricular consideration:

***] Ultimate Spider-Man: Power and Responsibility [Vol. I] - Brian Michael Bendis, Mark Bagley (2000)**

- Synopsis: The origin story of Spider-Man “rebooted” for the 21st century.
- Cultural Themes: American teenage experience: peer pressure, search for identity, self-control / responsibility vs. reckless egoism, confronting adversity, emotional growth / balance, loss of innocence
- Discussion: This volume contains the first issues of Marvel’s *Ultimates* line, an extremely successful effort to recreate its popular characters as if they existed for the first time in the 21st century. It will thoroughly engage a wide teenage audience (of both genders) due to its faithful portrayal of the contemporary American “coming-of-age” story and its allusions to (fairly) recent pop culture. What is especially interesting, from a mythological point of view, is to compare this book to the original Spider-Man origin comic of the 1960s to identify elements/themes that have been retained versus those that have been adapted to fit the interests of a slowly evolving American readership. A conversation that is sure to arise is the difference in aesthetic quality of the two works – the hand-drawn, faded look of the original versus the vivid, computer-generated images of this text – and this presents an excellent opportunity for discussing the dual-edged nature of technology in society. The novel also follows the archetypal Hero’s Journey template outlined by mythologist Joseph Campbell (and the outline of this article), and can serve as a contemporary model if one wants students to utilize this methodology in classic texts.

*] **Batman: The Dark Knight Returns** - *Frank Miller* (1986)

- Synopsis: Batman returns from retirement to bring order to a dystopian Gotham City that has collapsed into reckless egoism and paralyzing fear.
- Cultural Themes: Paranoia of foreign assault on civilians, media oversaturation, polarization of two extreme political ideologies, celebrity worship, nature of leadership, desensitization to violence, alienated youth culture, vigilantism
- Discussion: This text is unbelievably relevant despite being over twenty years old; replace “Soviet” with “Al Qaeda” and the script needs no further refreshing. It is a fascinating look at the real psyches behind the masks of our public heroes and villains, the love/hate relationship that accompanies them when thrust in the media spotlight, the delicate balancing act that must exist between security and civil liberties, individualism and civic virtue, and the need for community activism and “everyday” heroism. Though Christopher Nolan’s recent award-winning film *The Dark Knight* features many variations on the same themes, this text works well as a supplement to, not a proxy for, the extensive subject matter experience that students will bring with them to class. This novel also serves as an excellent illustration of the effects of modernization on literature, especially when compared with *Ultimate Spider-Man* or older Batman texts (including the campy 1960s TV series).

*] Marvels - Kurt Busiek, Alex Ross (1994)

- Synopsis: Adopting the premise, “What if the events of the Marvel Universe really happened, when they happened, in reality” this is the story of Phil Sheldon, an ordinary journalist as he tries to live an ordinary life within a world of “marvels.”

- Cultural Themes: Common vs. extraordinary existence, ownership vs. entitlement, celebrity worship, prejudice and mob mentality, family vs. work, fear of the unknown
- Discussion: This novel is a great experiment in iconic abstraction - the beautiful, hyper-realistic world painted by Ross immerses readers in the concrete experience of realism so that they become awe-struck spectators like the story's cast of common characters. It ironically questions the role that "super" heroes play in a society by showing this fictional America's devolution from a "scrappy country" of the 1930s, tackling a World War and Great Depression with vigor and confidence (and without superheroes), to a lost and powerless people of the 1970's, paralyzed in times of crisis, jealous in times of prosperity, and full of excuses for and entitlements from the super-hero celebrities that have come to dominate an essential component of their lifestyle. Easy parallels are made within student discussions to the larger-than-life politicians, musicians, athletes, actresses, etc. in contemporary experience.

Due to time and budget constraints, I *ultimately* chose *Ultimate Spider-Man* to incorporate into my own classroom. Of the three titles, it had the best chance of most directly speaking to my students' experiences as contemporary adolescent Americans and getting them to "feel" mythology in-the-moment. Ideally, I would also have liked to get *The Dark Knight Returns* in the hands of my students, to juxtapose Miller's darker worldview with Bendis' idealistic take on the various aspects of American heroism, but I settled on using the (then recent) film *The Dark Knight* as a quicker and cheaper alternative means to the same end.

The \$300 in grant money allowed me to purchase half of a class set of the novel. I was initially worried that this lack of books would be problematic, but it turned out that this perceived shortcoming was actually one of my unit's biggest strengths (see below).

This time, as I prepared to begin my "new and improved" mythology unit, I left Thor and company in Asgard. In fact, I left all my literature shelved, and started with a simple student homework assignment: bring in a picture that represents modern-day life in America. My intentions were not so subtle – to get students thinking about culture and to bring them to the realization that images, too, can convey meaning. The small group discussions of flags and churches and sports and shopping malls that followed achieved these aims marvelously. The class used the pictures as a springboard for coming up with a list of American values, and I used particular images as a way to illustrate basic visual principles of denotation and connotation.

I followed the next two days with an interactive power-point lecture illustrating basic visual literacy principles as they are applied to comics (inspired largely by the McCloud and Eisner texts mentioned earlier). We discussed sample pages from a variety of different artists and genres as I introduced students to the ideas of visual abstraction (the subliminal effect of cartoon representations versus realistic ones), paneling (the layout of pictures on the page), closure (readers' inferences between panels), encapsulation (the influence that perspective, framing, and posture have on perception), and color. It was probably the most successful lecture, in terms of engagement, that I gave all year, to the point that students were begging to borrow the *Spider-Man* text over the weekend before we would read it as a class the following week.

Begging to read was not something I was used to in my mythology unit. It made me feel extra guilty that I did not have individual copies of the text to give each student - that is, until

they started reading in pairs. What I had dismissed as a moderate inconvenience became a major asset: due to necessary collaboration, students were stopping to discuss visual literacy concepts as they read. Yes, junior high school students were willingly, enthusiastically, engaging in literary discussion using specific textual evidence to support their opinions. I eavesdropped on conversations ranging from the mechanical (one student helping another understand the order in which the panels on a page were intended to be read) to the metaphorical (why does this version of the Green Goblin look demonic?), to the meta-cognitive (a heated debate over the artist's intended effect on readers by depicting Peter Parker in the manner he did in a certain panel).

Such in-depth reading of the text made full-class mythology discussions authentic and substantive. Using our previously-generated list of American values as a guide, we talked about what it means to be a hero in our society, the trials of "coming of age" in America, and the way our values have changed over the last fifty years (prompted by my inclusion of the 1962 Spider-Man origin comic, which I read aloud to the students while projecting the pages on the classroom Smartboard, a technique I also used when I wanted to discuss visual literacy concepts regarding a specific page of *Ultimate Spider-Man*).

We spent an entire five-day week on Spider-Man, alternating between partner reading and full-class discussion. The next week we watched *The Dark Knight*, followed by a day-long "Socratic seminar" (student-led discussion) negotiating the somewhat contradictory worldviews presented in these two modern myths. Students' newly-acquired visual literacy skills helped in dissection of the film's cinematography and the ensuing discussion thereafter, one that Joseph Campbell would have been proud to hear. In totality, we spent twelve class periods discussing contemporary mythology.

The Second Trial: Classical Literature

After the overwhelmingly unanticipated success of the unit's introduction, now came the bigger challenge: getting students to take their newfound knowledge out of their comfort zone and into the Contact Zone. It was time to bring Thor back.

Since my first experiment went so well, though, I afforded myself some liberty in toying with another idea I had been pondering: student choice. While *I* enjoyed the exploits of violent, hairy Norsemen, I realized there were some students for whom Thor would always be a hard sell. Rather than force the square peg, I looked back at my unit objectives, and decided that my ultimate goal was to get students to be more aware of other cultural perspectives through literature, but not necessarily more aware of Icelandic Viking culture. I gambled that students would be more likely to apply themselves with an open-mind and a hearty work ethic if they had some stake in the culture they would be studying – and that once they learned how to be appreciative of the mythology of one foreign culture, they would be much more likely to willingly sample the mythology of others.

That bet paid off. We spent the next week of the unit in our school's Media Center, where students were charged with learning as much as they could about a self-selected society from a different time period and geographic location than our own. They were required to find secondary-source research that discussed the history, values, and way-of-life of their chosen culture, but they also had to read at least three short myths from the civilization. Inspired by their collaboration earlier, I allowed students to work in partners on this assignment, too, which proved helpful yet again for pairs, particularly in decoding their selected myths.

I acted as literature consultant during their independent study, suggesting good stories for the various cultures that had been selected: Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Chinese, Native Americans, African tribes, and yes, even one lone Norseman. It was exciting to see the broad diversity represented – much more than I could have ever packed into a traditional mythology unit – and even more exciting to see the groups compare cultures with each other when prompted to do so periodically throughout the week.

While it would be disingenuous to suggest that the majority of students approached this second assignment with the same zeal they had applied to the contemporary mythology we studied, most were considerably more engaged in the study of classical mythology than my previous classes had ever been, and these new students certainly carried the content from their previous weeks' study with them. Many were attempting to create a list of cultural values for their chosen society by comparing the heroes from the classical myths they were reading to the contemporary comic book icons we had studied together, noting any similarities or differences that appeared.

Some lucky students were even able to apply their newfound comic knowledge. Preceding the unit, I was able to convince my (thankfully open-minded) librarian to order graphic adaptations of popular classical myths. Jeff Limke and Graphic Universe offer a large and diverse line of myths-in-comics, and there are many critically-acclaimed stand-alone adaptations such as Garreth Hind's *Beowulf*, George O'Connor's *Zeus: King of the Gods*, or Erik Evensen's *Gods of Asgard*. Students who used these adaptations seemed to have an easier time understanding the message of the myth, because they were afforded the additional language of visual media as a means to translate.

The Ultimate Boon: Assessment

At the end of any quest comes the final test, the challenge that determines if our heroes have been transformed by their journey. For my mythology unit, this took the form of a creative writing project.

I asked each student to design an original, heroic character with larger-than-life attributes who embodies contemporary American values. Students were to create both a visual representation of this character and a brief “trading card” biography of their background, abilities, and personality. Once completed, they were to write a short, original story in which their hero had become displaced in time and had just emerged in the culture they had researched. The story needed to demonstrate students’ knowledge of the foreign society they had become experts on and to emphasize the conflicts that would occur due to the differences in values between their protagonist and setting (though to ultimately find a suitable resolution).

As with any project, there were varying degrees of success, but many of my students authentically found their way into the Contact Zone for their researched culture, and by sharing their stories on the last day of the unit, exposed their peers to a wide variety of worldviews they probably would not have been open to otherwise.

One female student created Glory Woman, a feminist who struggled with the misogyny of Ancient Greece but ultimately helped a young girl marry out of love instead of her father’s will, and in the meantime, move past her own super-heroine ego to find true love herself. Another student created Small Fox, a modern-day Native American who returns to his heritage

and ironically brings our nation's own values of democracy and liberty back to our European ancestors, preventing them from invading the New World that would one day become America; in the process, he learns to be less materialistic and wasteful. The Girl of Nature is a champion of recycling, who tries to inspire a "cleaner, greener" Industrial Revolution, despite widespread poverty and a lack of education among the masses.

By the end of the presentations, this time it was me who was asking, "So why do we have to read this stuff?"

A hand goes up. "What else would be more important?"

The sound of apotheosis was never sweeter.

The Return

Hopefully something in the preceding pages has inspired a desire for exploration within the genre of American super-hero comics and the critical examination of contemporary cultural values in the classroom. Adding this missing element has changed the way my students think and talk about mythology, and has allowed for considerably more authentic Contact Zone experiences with foreign cultures than the lip-service I had previously been paying the pedagogy. And that is how mythology should be: alive and vibrant, not a dead carcass for forensic analysis. The myths of old can live again and speak lost truths and timeless wisdom, but only when their audiences have an appreciation for the context of their own culture.

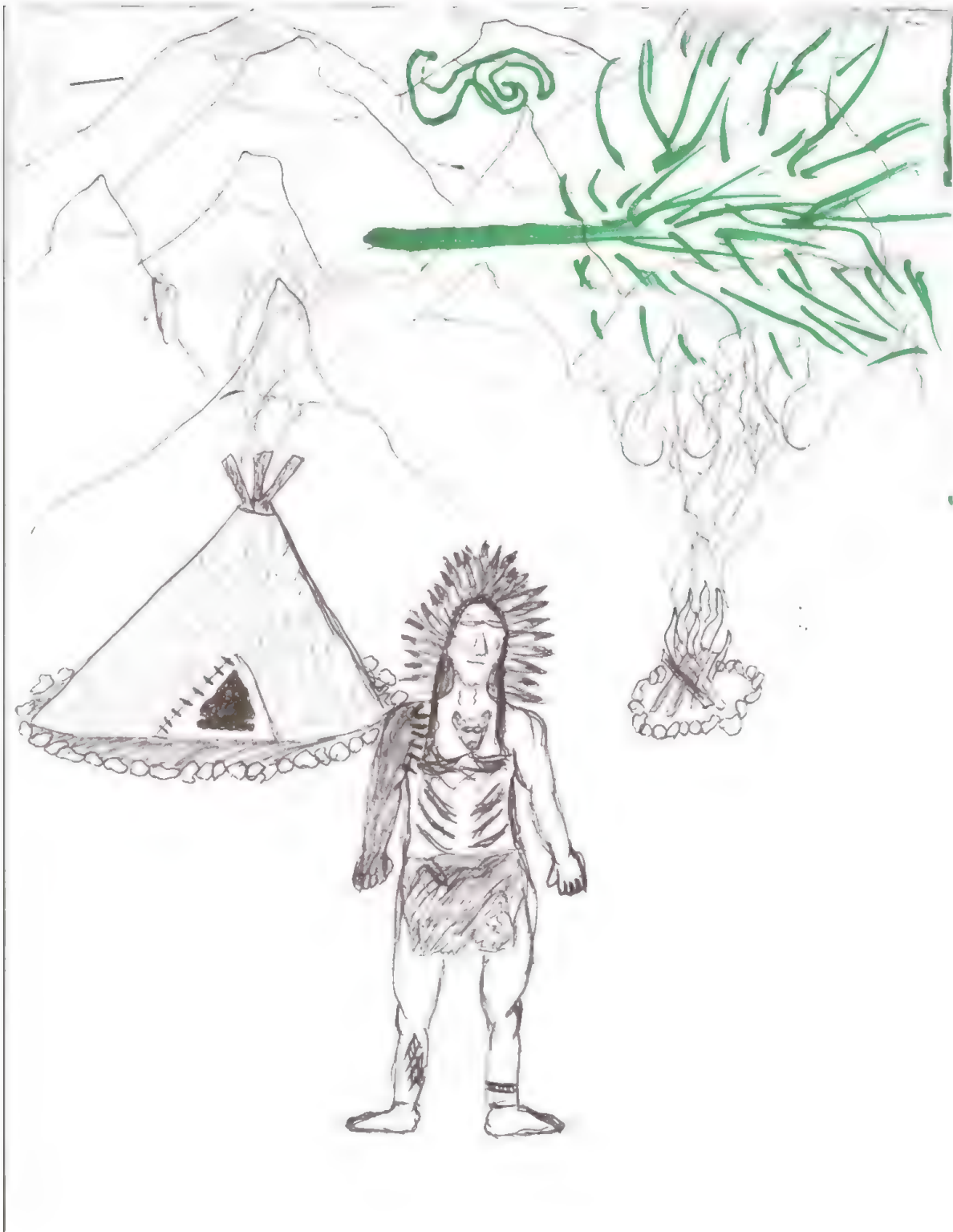
Which brings me back to our hero, Thor. It turns out he was a few decades ahead of me all along. He reinvented himself as a Marvel comic book character back in the 1960s (and will in fact be the subject of the company's next blockbuster movie come summer 2011) and has been

comfortably enjoying an exciting array of new adventures – and inspiring the minds of new generations – ever since. May he continue to postpone Ragnarök for many more cultures to come...

Appendix – Student Illustrations: “Glory Woman”



Appendix – Student Illustrations: “Small Fox” and “Girl of Nature”





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1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Beadling, Laura L. (2010) "Imaging Internment: Teaching Miné Okubo's Citizen 13660 as a Work of Comics in the Contact Zone," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5.
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**Imaging Internment: Teaching Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*
as a Work of Comics in the Contact Zone**

by Laura L. Beadling

Introduction

Although Miné Okubo is an American citizen and the events she records in *Citizen 13660* took place on American soil, this essay will argue that her work is nevertheless a work of the contact zone. Furthermore, Okubo's record of the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II can be usefully read and taught as an autoethnography that constructs a counterhistory of World War II. The juxtaposition of Okubo's autobiographical record of her internment experience with a variety of "official" images can help students learn about the construction of knowledge. Such classroom work can help students "decolonize knowledge," to borrow a phrase from Mary Louise Pratt, by demonstrating how knowledge is not neutral but is instead constructed by constituencies with a vested interest in how events are depicted. Due to the power differential inherent in the contact zone, these constituencies typically also have differential access to publishing houses, newspapers, and other venues for cultural meaning-making, which affects which accounts enter "official" history and, subsequently, high school and college classrooms (2002, p.2).

While most camp memoirs were written decades after the fact, Okubo created hers during the experience itself and, because of this, she operated under explicit and implicit restrictions of what she could depict and how she could present her story. Furthermore, her work appeared at a

time when many groups—including artists, internees, government officials, political cartoonists, etc.—were creating images of Japanese and Japanese Americans. For students to become proficient readers of Okubo’s images and text, they must both negotiate her revisions of the autobiographical form and understand the cultural context in which her “unsolicited oppositional discourse” appeared (Pratt 2002, p.5).

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans came under immediate and intense scrutiny. Exacerbated by decades of racial hostility on the West Coast, Pearl Harbor provided an excuse to remove them. In the early months of 1942, the U.S. Army began rounding up Japanese Americans at hastily-constructed “assembly centers” before shipping them to 10 permanent camps scattered throughout the continental interior. Some 120,000 Japanese Americans—over two thirds of them American citizens—were interned during the war. Okubo was first sent to Tanforan, a race track cum detention center, before being sent to Topaz, a camp in central Utah. Although photographic equipment was prohibited, she immediately began creating a visual record of Tanforan and Topaz in sketches, paintings, and other images. After the war, she used some 200 of her sketches in *Citizen 13660*, her autobiographical record of her internment, which was published in 1946.

Although the forced removal of Japanese Americans to internment camps during World War II is not usually thought of as a “contact zone” in Pratt’s sense of the term, I believe the term is apt nonetheless. Pratt notes that a contact zone is an ideological space in which cultures meet and clash over meaning under conditions of unequal power, which describes very well the struggles over image-making between Japanese Americans like Okubo and the dominant culture,

which created and disseminated prolific caricatures, propaganda images, and other representations of Japanese and Japanese Americans through newspapers, posters, government documents, and other powerful and popular venues.

Despite the prolific visual records, Okubo realized early the danger for the internment to be forgotten. She thus stressed the need for education in her statements before the Congressional Reparations Hearings during the 1980s and elsewhere. Okubo's sentiments proved to be prescient, as the majority of my students are entirely unaware of the internment. In informal polls taken before we study *Citizen 13660*, only approximately a quarter of my students knew that Japanese Americans had been interned during World War II and, of those, almost no one knew any specifics. Reading *Citizen 13660*, in which Okubo records her experiences from directly before the war, through her internment, until her final release in 1944 is a window into a history of which my students are largely unaware.

In addition to learning about the internment, it is important that students also learn about the contact zone that surrounded the camps and the Japanese Americans themselves. Pratt noted that contact zones are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (4). Emphasizing the clash between internees and those who attempted to justify or minimize the camps, often by dehumanizing the Japanese Americans or minimizing or normalizing the camp experience, can help students see that knowledge and history aren't “neutral” or “objective,” as many of them think, but instead constructed by interested parties. Comparative analysis of *Citizen 13660* and other images—by Ansel Adams, various War Relocation Authority (WRA) photographers, propaganda images, and

even other images made by Okubo—can demonstrate how artists resistant to the official narrative bring forward certain elements of the camps (guards, guns, barbed wire, overcrowding, harsh conditions, lack of privacy, dehumanization and depression) while government photographers not only minimize or eliminate those elements but also bring forward other aspects (baseball games, Boy Scout events, nuclear families, well stocked commissaries, etc) that help normalize the camps.

In addition, Okubo's style serves as a counter to caricatures of Japanese and Japanese Americans that appeared in both propaganda and in mainstream publications like *LIFE* and *Time*. The contact zone that surrounded the camps was a site of complex and multifaceted struggles over representation and meaning; a close examination of *Citizen 13660* can help students learn about not only this particular contact zone but also help prepare them to see contact zones in our current moment, particularly those struggles surrounding immigration, a divisive subject in recent years.

Contact Zones in the Classroom

Pratt's description of the contact zone as a place of struggle can also be used to partially describe my pedagogy when teaching ethnic studies courses. I don't merely point out contact zones in the literature my students read or at past junctures of American history, but actively create contact zones in my classroom by challenging my students' views of history, democracy, and race; as John Gaughan asserts in *Teaching in the Contact Zone*, "opening minds to difference" and recognizing that often fear comes before empathy are pedagogies of the contact

zone (9). One of the courses I've recently been responsible for teaching is Minority Women Writers, a class offered by the University of Wisconsin Platteville to students who are 95% white and from the immediate area of rural southwestern Wisconsin. As a STEM-oriented school, UWP has an unusual gender mix: in a world where colleges and universities are typically enrolling more women than men, roughly 67% of UWP students are male. UWP requires all students to take a minimum of 3 credit hours in a course designated as meeting an ethnic studies requirement. What this means in practice is that I, a white woman, typically teach Minority Women Writers to a group of largely white and male students who are in the room because they need to fulfill a requirement.

Because of these dynamics, I find that my students tend to be interested in the past and open to learning about U.S. history and literature from the margins, while the more difficult discussions tend to be those situated in or near our present time. One of my goals, however, is to assist my students in connecting those past clashes to those happening around us now, in which we are always inextricably involved, at least indirectly. Typically, my students have been open to learning about issues that they feel are safely in the past and/or were not, in their view, relevant to Wisconsin. I've had very lively yet polite discussions, for instance, about slave narratives and the Cherokee Trail of Tears. When we move on to discussions of *In Whose Honor*, a documentary about using Native American mascots, or June Jordan's poem "Jim Crow: The Sequel," which discusses, among other things, Affirmative Action, the students are much more vocal and discussions tend to be divisive.

One goal I have as an instructor is helping students begin to see that education is partly the process of recognizing knowledge as dynamic and constructed rather than something that is passively passed from an instructor to a student. This view, which I share with my students, also foregrounds another contact zone that is often created by using Okubo's text in the classroom: the difference in values and beliefs about education, knowledge, and history between my students and I. Okubo's counterhistory is a critical intervention for most of my students who tend to be aware of WWII only or primarily as a "just war" in which America was a liberator; this "knowledge" largely comes from popular culture images, according to student response papers. This gap in knowledge that is filled in by popular culture representations like *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Band of Brothers* (2001), and other shows and films, is part of the contact zone that still exists in terms of the internment.

The switch from more or less disconnected interest when the subject are issues safely in the past to passionate disagreements when we reach current events is a productive one that leads us to discuss why the more recent debates are so much more charged and divisive. In addition to recognizing contact zones in the past, such as that between the internees and the WRA, I want students to be able to recognize current conflicts as contact zones, in which there are differing viewpoints with differing stakes in the debates. By using contact zone theory, students are more able to see how current debates, like past debates, are often at least partially a matter of differing groups with unequal power and access to institutional authority struggling over how groups, conflicts, and issues will be framed, debated, and, ultimately, remembered in the national discourse. This is one way I attempt to achieve my goal of having students recognize the

constructedness of knowledge and the implications that has not only on considerations of the past but also on our contemporary world. I assign *Citizen 13660* relatively early in the semester because it gives me a chance to introduce contact zone theory, which will be one way that I ask students to approach more contemporary, and more volatile, subjects later in the semester.

***CITIZEN 13660* as Autobiographical Comics**

Citizen 13660 is most often categorized as an autobiography, which is typically thought of not only as a “highly western form,” as Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez puts it, but as alien to Japanese or Japanese American writers in particular (1996, p.41). Sidonie Smith takes a more nuanced view and notes that, while she recognizes that there are “histories of personal referentiality elsewhere than in the West,” including women’s life writing in Heian Japan, the autobiography “is certainly a much deployed genre” in the West (2000, p.4). Despite these difficulties, Okubo nevertheless chose the autobiography as one of her methods of representing the camps. As Ann Rayson points out in her work on Japanese and Japanese American women’s autobiographies, such a writer must express “an independent voice through a genre incompatible with Japanese behavioral codes and traditions” (1987, p.44).

By engaging with and simultaneously revising the autobiographical genre, Okubo is not only creating an autobiography but also creating an autoethnography. Autoethnographies, according to Pratt, are “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms” in order to represent themselves to the dominant culture (2001, p.7). In *Citizen 13660*, Okubo appropriates narrative forms and

strategies of the dominant culture—namely, the autobiographical form—in an attempt to render the internees visible to the dominant culture. At the same time, Okubo revises the genre in order to make her critique of the camps. As the first Japanese American writer of an inside-the-camp autobiography, Okubo both engages with the dominant culture’s own terms for this genre by focusing on herself yet also revises the autobiography through her neutral tone, avoidance of emotion in favor of communal and documentary impulses, and her use of image and text.

My students are often put off by Okubo’s reconfigurations of the autobiography, especially her emotional reticence, which goes against what they expect from autobiographies. This is a common thread among Japanese American women writers of autobiography; Nisei, or second generation, women autobiography writers tend to downplay emotion generally. Traise Yamamoto observes that “Nisei women’s autobiographies are frustratingly *unautobiographical*, not given to personal disclosure or passages of intimate self-reflection” (1999, p.103; emphasis in original). Vivian Fumiko Chin agrees with this sentiment and notes that *Citizen 13660* “complies with this observation by maintaining an emotional distance from its subject. Okubo declines to state how she feels and upholds an even, unemotional tone in the writing throughout the book” (2008, p.69-70). Student response papers often reflect students’ frustration with this aspect of the work; most often, this is articulated as a difficulty of “connecting with” or “relating to” Okubo because of her overt stance of neutrality, at least in the text of the work. Many of my students express a desire for Okubo to speak explicitly about her feelings and her own day to day activities, as do other creators of autobiographical texts with whom they are more familiar (Frank McCourt, Maya Angelou, Anne Frank, and Frederick Douglass have all been mentioned by my

students as autobiographical writers with whom they are familiar; many of my students also cite vlogs, blogs, and the “video diary” segments featured on many reality television shows as autobiographical texts with which they are familiar).

One way to address these difficulties is to help students become more careful and adept readers of Okubo's images because much of Okubo's feelings towards and critique of the internment can be found in the space between the image and the text. Autoethnography aims to represent the other to the dominant culture in terms that are both familiar to the dominant culture but which also renders the viewpoint of the other legible. Okubo makes the fact that she is writing to a wide audience that includes both internees and non-internees clear when she notes in the preface to the 1983 edition that she made the drawings both to send to her non-interned friends to keep them updated on her situation and to be exhibited eventually. This larger audience can also be seen in how Okubo addresses her readers both in the text and in the prefatory materials she added later. This can be seen in the text, for instance, when she describes Japanese games such as Goh and shogi as “somewhat similar to our chess and checkers” (p.105) which again marks her attempts to connect with an audience that is not exclusively Japanese American. Furthermore, her use of the word *our* to describe chess and checkers is a clear if subtle insistence on her own inclusion in the larger community of America.

Although *Citizen 13660* is not typically thought of as a work of comics due mostly to its lack of a multi-panel page and the absence of balloons, I believe that comics can serve as a useful frame because it highlights Okubo's reliance on the reader to participate in the making of meaning by interpreting this space between the image and text. Like comics, *Citizen 13660*

consists of images and words that interact in complex ways that the reader must interpret.

Okubo's technique aligns well with Scott McCloud's theory of 'the gutter' which notes that the reader must participate in the making of meaning in the space between individual panels.

McCloud contends that the gutter, the empty space between the panels, is where the reader is drawn into the making of meaning. In his *Understanding Comics*, McCloud uses as an example of the gutter two hypothetical sequential panels: one of an axe-toting maniac chasing a fleeing victim and a second panel of a "scream" drawn over a cityscape. McCloud asserts "I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style" (1994, p.68).

This is how the space between Okubo's images and text work; readers must collaborate with the artist to create meaning. For instance, when the packing is done and Okubo and her brother place the tags with the family number on their bags and themselves, the text simply reads "We tagged our baggage with the family number, 13660, and pinned the personal tags on ourselves; we were ready at last" (p.22). Although this moment, like most of the rest of the book, is told in a neutral tone, the reader must pay careful attention to *both* the image and the text in order to see what Kristine Kuramitsu terms Okubo's "deep sharp social commentary" (p.626). Unlike every other illustration in the book, this image has no setting, no background, nothing except the representation of her brother, herself, and their bags. There are only a few small lines meant to represent the ground beneath them. The profoundly alienating experience of being reduced to equivalency with your baggage, both marked by the same number, is rendered by this

image's unique lack of context and background; Okubo and her brother have been dislocated from inclusion in the human community and instead are seen by the government as baggage to be identified and stored. This dislocation is not clear from the text or the image alone; the reader must collaborate with Okubo by interpreting the space between the image and the text.

Another theorist of comics, Julia Round, asserts that, in the gutter, "the reader works alongside the creators as a kind of contributory author, both by interpreting the panel content, and by filling in the gaps" (1994, p.317). In *Citizen 13660*, the text does not merely explain what the image shows, nor does the image simply reinforce what the text describes. Instead, Okubo plays the image and text off each other in order to implicate the reader in interpreting her critique of the racially-motivated internment. As comic artist and theorist Megan Kelso notes, "[U]nlike straight illustrated text, Okubo creates complex relationships between word and image. By casting the text as the straight man and letting the drawings show emotions and contradictions hidden behind the dry facts, Okubo employs that strange magic of comics—the interaction between words and images that don't neatly fit. New meaning arises from the discord" (para. 3). Although Okubo's gutter isn't the typical gutter between the panels of comics, the purpose is the same: to draw the reader into the process of interpretation and meaning-making in order to implicate the reader in the story.

Although my students claim that Okubo's work lacks emotion or a sense of outrage with which they can connect, the text is filled with critique of the internment; it is in the gutter and, thus, a reader must look carefully at both the text and the images to understand Okubo's meaning. Chin notes that, in contrast to the neutrality of the text, "the illustrations show the

emotions the text elides” (2008, p.70). As an example, Chin discusses the moment early in the text when Okubo and her brother leave their home to report to the Tanforan Assembly Center; the text remains neutral, merely noting that they took a last look before leaving, but the accompanying illustration reveals several tears on Okubo’s cheek. This aspect of Okubo’s work—the need to read both image and text carefully in order to participate in meaning-making—seems to give students difficulty; I have noticed in discussing the work with students that they tend to skip over the interpretive act and only read the words and glance at the drawings.

Because of this difficulty, I have begun giving my students reading assignments to work on as they read the text, one of which is asking them to note at least three places where the image and text are not simple reflections of each other but instead comment upon one another or say something entirely different. By focusing on Okubo’s gutter—on the spaces between image and text—they learn to read Okubo’s work more carefully. As an example, I show my students the illustration Chin references as well as several examples noted by Brada-Williams in which Okubo’s expression in the images breaks with her ethos of neutrality in the text (such as on pages 38, 59, and 142), but then ask them to find other instances of this. This gap between text and image is one of Okubo’s most obvious revisions of the autobiography but it is also one that gives students the most trouble; by giving them specific instructions on what to look for, students become careful readers of both image and text.

One of the things my students notice when doing this reading assignment is the ironic use throughout the book of national symbols, including the flag; the prominent inclusion of these symbols is where Okubo embeds much of her critique of the internment. For instance, the

illustration on page 61 shows the camp's post office from the outside while long lines of people wait to get in the front door or wait to be served at one of the windows. Featured prominently in almost the very center of the frame is an American flag which, at the top of the flag pole, is the tallest object within the frame. The text accompanying this image indicates that the Tanforan post office was always quite busy, particularly since internees had to order all clothing and other goods by catalogue. The text ends by noting that the infrequent letters she received from her father were also postmarked from a different camp each time; Okubo's family was splintered during the internment and her father was sent first to Missoula, Montana and later to Louisiana while Okubo and her younger brother were sent to Tanforan and Topaz, her sister was sent to Heart Mountain, Wyoming and one of her brothers was drafted (Creff 2008, p. 7). Okubo notes that "our family was all split up by the Evacuation and it was a long time before we knew the whereabouts of the rest of the family" (Sun 1972, p. 19).

Finally, the text accompanying the drawing of the Post Office notes, without commentary, that "letters from my European friends told me how lucky I was to be free and safe at home" (Okubo 1983, p.61). Again, the irony here is made quite apparent in the juxtaposition of the visuals, especially the American flag, and the text, which notes without emotion the letters from her friends. Not only has Okubo herself been interned, but her family was broken up and interned separately; her home was destroyed in every sense, despite her status as an American citizen.

A few pages later, there is an illustration of Okubo in bed trying to get comfortable under a blanket clearly marked with "U.S." Again, the national symbol is framed almost in the center

of the image while the rest of the picture tells a different story: on the extreme left hand side of the frame Okubo, irritated, gazes on while, on the extreme right hand side of the frame, two mice look cheekily back at her from the bottom of her bed. The text briefly notes that the internees had to “make friends with the wild creatures in the camp, especially the spiders, mice, and rats, because we were outnumbered” (p.68). The image clearly depicts these facts of life by including, most obviously, the mice but also dirt, spiders, and cobwebs. Okubo, as usual, does not explicitly comment on the irony of a U.S. citizen having to share quarters with mice and spiders after being evicted by the same U.S. government from a law-abiding home for purely racial reasons.

Finally, towards the end of the book, Okubo includes an illustration of the first mass gathering in the Topaz camp, which was to honor a fallen Japanese American soldier. Okubo also notes that many religious faiths were represented at the memorial and that “former members of the American Legion also participated” (p.168). The illustration shows a large crowd of internees gathered around a small dais that holds several men in uniforms or suits. Off to the side, an American flag flies. Again, like the image of the post office, the flag is the tallest object within the frame and is quite prominent. As with the other examples, Okubo includes this national symbol to point out the irony of the situation without explicitly remarking on it. In this case, the internees have gathered to honor a Japanese American soldier who was killed in the line of duty defending his country which had interned him, his family, and his entire community. Once students have learned to read both image and text carefully, they can see that it isn’t that

Okubo doesn't have an opinion on the internment or was unemotional about it, but that she had to tread carefully and encode her critique.

In *Citizen 13660*, Okubo's less overtly expressive visual style matches the neutral-sounding text and observing these choices leads my students and I into a discussion of how Okubo's positionality affects the manner in which she represents the camps and the internees. As an artist, it not only makes sense for her to tell the story of internment at least partially through images, but it also can be seen as a response to the proliferating images of Japanese Americans in the dominant culture. As Jasmine Alinder asserts, "[I]mages were integral to the incarceration process from its beginning and shaped the historical events that they purported to disclose" (2009, p.16). Okubo had difficulty in finding a publisher for her book, which, regardless of how neutral it may seem to contemporary readers, reminded the American public at the time of events that many would rather not acknowledge. As Okubo noted, "It was still too early. Everything that was Japanese was still rat poison so the book became a souvenir for [former inmates]" (qtd. in Robinson 2008, p.171). In a conversation about teaching ethnic autobiography, Yamamoto notes that Asian American autobiographies typically include a "certain amount of coding" simply because "an Asian American could hardly expect his/her book to be published if it were an overt diatribe against white racism," which is certainly true of Okubo (p.15). This is another indication of the differential power dynamics in the contact zone that affect who gets to record their version of history; this point can often serve as a jumping off point for students to discuss their own educational histories and compare the books and perspectives that are included in high school classrooms.

Placing 13660 Within a Context of Images

In the contact zone between Japanese Americans, always a marginalized group, especially on the West Coast, and the dominant culture, *Citizen 13660* struggles over the representations of the internees and Japanese Americans that will become a part of the official discourse. Linda Gordon notes that “the construction of Japanese Americans as an internal enemy was itself partially a visual process. A demeaning caricature of the Japanese face was imprinted on the public through posters, graffiti, atrocity films, cartoons, and caricatures” (2008, p.37) and therefore, to understand the contact zone in which Okubo was working, her images must be positioned within this complicated matrix of competing images and narratives. Furthermore, in terms of pedagogy, as Noelle Brada-Williams suggests, “A classroom analysis of *Citizen 13660* will benefit greatly from bringing in additional visual images of internment” (2004, p.63). For an event so forgotten in the mainstream educational culture, the Japanese American internment was extensively recorded by a diverse collection of constituencies and in several media. By making students aware of the image matrix that provides the context for Okubo’s work, they can begin to see how her book was not produced in a vacuum but as a response and addition to the continuing struggle over who would represent the camps and how. Therefore, a comparative analysis of various images—propaganda posters, War Relocation Authority (WRA) photographs, and Ansel Adams’ photographs—reveals the complicated power struggles of the contact zone. Analyzing these struggles can help students begin to understand the constructedness of knowledge. Once the past is over, our only access to it is through documents which are inevitably created by people with stakes in how the past is represented.

Once students have learned to read the gutter, we then discuss the images in more detail because they also need help in interpreting the drawings.

Many of my students are unimpressed with Okubo as an artist and they often interpret the drawings as very simple and “unartistic.” Many express surprise when they learn that she was a professional artist well before internment. To counter this, I begin our discussion by showing some of her other artwork, including her charcoal images “Evacuee Woman” and “Neighbors” (Kuramitsu’s detailed reading of several of Okubo’s charcoal images can be of use here), the pastel work “Moving In,” the gouache works “Dust Storm,” and her *Trek* covers (all of these images are in the book *Miné Okubo: An American Experience*) which helps highlight her artistic choices in *Citizen 13660* as both *an artist* and as a *commentator* because of the radically different styles and emotional valences in her other works. While the style and tone within *Citizen 13660* are consistent, her other works that I show demonstrate Okubo’s wide range of style and her comfort with emotionally vibrant images. The drawings in *Citizen 13660* are simple line drawings for a reason, not because that is the only style available to her. Furthermore, by showing these other works, all of which can be read in terms of emotion and tone, I can demonstrate to students that she is capable of creating emotionally powerful images. She chooses not to—or at least does so in a different way—in *Citizen 13660* for specific reasons which can be discussed.

Because autoethnographic texts are “those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations,” it is crucial for students to understand what Okubo was responding to with her images (Pratt 2001, p. 7). Such cultural context is vital to

understanding the clash of cultures in the contact zone as meaning is struggled for and actively created. Okubo's images create a counterhistory and counterknowledge of the internment, as Pratt notes that texts created in the contact zone often do. In order to help students understand not only content, but also context and constructedness, I stage a series of comparative analyses between the images of *Citizen 13660* and a variety of other images. Each set of comparisons is meant to highlight certain aspects of the struggle in the contact zone over meanings of the camps and the Japanese Americans.

Okubo and Propaganda Posters

After looking at Okubo's other images of the camps to better see *Citizen 13660* as part of her overall body of work, I bring in other images to compare with *Citizen 13660* in order to help students further understand the dynamic creation of knowledge through context, especially in the contact zone. A side-by-side viewing of an image from *Citizen 13660* and one or two propaganda images can help students appreciate how Okubo's art counters racist stereotypes present in American culture. In particular, I show several "This is the Enemy" images (several of which can be found by entering "this is the enemy" into google), which highlight the supposed danger to white American women posed by Japanese men. These images also utilize color and light/shadow to emphasize the alleged monstrosity of Japanese men; the Japanese figures are always distinctly "yellow" in contrast the white women they are menacing and, in addition, many of the images use shadows to foreground the purported menacing and sneaky nature of the Japanese. By combining the autobiographical form with what Zhou describes as "the precision

of Japanese line art,” (2007, p.55) Okubo can focus on recording individual variation, detailed faces and expressions, and various temperaments and personalities that contrast with the hysterical and monolithic image presented through the various kinds of propaganda images. I have often found that students don’t recognize Okubo’s commitment to showing the diversity of the internees until they compare her drawings to more stereotypical images.

In this vein, another useful comparison can also be made between Okubo and Theodor Geisel, more commonly known as Dr. Seuss, who drew political cartoons as well as his more famous children’s tales. Although Geisel was critical of anti-Semitism and racism in America, he was a proponent of the internment of Japanese Americans. Typically, I show the image “Waiting for the Signal from Home” and “Wipe that Sneer off his Face” (both available in *Dr. Seuss Goes to War* and on line). Both of Geisel’s images rely on stereotypical features to convey the idea of “Japaneseness”; in the crowd scene of “Waiting for,” all the people have basically the same features, expressions, posture, etc. while the close up in “Wipe that Sneer” simply renders these stereotypical features in more detail. By contrast, even in the crowd scene on page 38, Okubo takes pains to make each figure unique by including different heights and postures, different clothes and hairstyles, different expressions, and other details. Likewise, even on page 153, where Okubo is explicitly pointing out how similar the women look because of the reliance on catalogue shopping, she makes each figure distinct: although each of the three women are wearing an identical shirt, each has a unique face, expression, hairstyle, and set of features. As Creff puts it, Okubo’s many close ups on faces “reflect the physical diversity of the Japanese American community. Her internees are never homogenized or reduced to recognizable

Orientalist stereotypes” (*Imaging* p. 83). Okubo’s drawings are of the contact zone as she, and other interned and non-interned artists, struggled against the representations made by the government and other mainstream entities that attempted to control the meanings of the Japanese Americans in the public mind.

Okubo and War Photographs

While the propaganda posters and Okubo’s works are drawn or painted, and thus imaginatively created images, I also compare Okubo’s work to the art of photography. Because there is a tendency to believe that photography is a relatively “objective” art form that simply records what is in front of the camera, this comparison requires some preparatory discussion with students. Comparative analysis of images that students are often tempted to read as “objective” help them see the constructedness of visual rhetoric by interested parties, which is an important skill for students to develop as visual rhetoric continues to proliferate. Dismantling a belief in the possibility for images to be “objective” is a necessary precursor to learning to interpret not only works like Okubo’s but a variety of images, including those created and disseminated by government agencies, news sources, and a wide variety of institutions and individuals.

Okubo’s text and pictures are a perfect vehicle for discussing these complicated issues with visual rhetoric. Once the task of the removal of the Japanese Americans was transferred from the Army to the WRA, a civilian agency, “the task of the camera,” according to Jasmine Alinder, “was to portray the incarceration process as efficient and humane, and ‘internees’ themselves as orderly” (2009, p. 25); *Citizen 13660* presents a counter-history that contests the

WRA's perspective as encoded in the extensive WRA photographic archive, which have recently been made available online (see, for instance, the War Relocation Authority Photographs of Japanese-American Evacuation and Resettlement, 1942-1945 collection in the Online Archive of California). Not only were Okubo's drawings struggling generally against the propaganda images ubiquitous during the war, but also against the sanitized images of the internment camps that appeared in newspapers and other public venues specifically. While the photographs of both Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange were suppressed during and even after the war due to their critique of the internment, the WRA hired numerous photographers to take copious photographs. Many of these photographs show sanitized images of the camps: portraits of single subjects or nuclear families, often smiling, are shown in clean, spacious, well-stocked "relocation centers" that (the WRA took pains to note in their brochure "Relocation of Japanese-Americans") were "NOT and never were intended to be internment camps or places of confinement" (WRA para. 6).

Accordingly, the images of the camps made by WRA photographers overwhelmingly tend to avoid showing the guards, fences, watchtowers, or other penal aspects of the camps; indeed, there were official prohibitions against photographing such objects. For instance, the archive of photographs from Topaz, the camp where Okubo and her brother were interned, include photographs with captions like "This former California tournament runner-up keeps his golf form by first preparing a short course and then spending all his spare time with his irons and putting clubs," "A warm, sunny afternoon at the TRC [Topaz Relocation Center] finds footballs in the air everywhere as young Americans of Japanese ancestry practice their favorite outdoor

game,” and “Bennie Nobori, former animator at a Hollywood film studio, is now a cartoonist on the Topaz Times” (Online Archive of California). These photographs show smiling people engaging in normal activities; no guards or guns are visible. Not all the photographs are completely sanitized: there are images of the funeral service for James Wakasa, an elderly internee shot by guards, included in the archive. Nevertheless, the overwhelming tone of the WRA photographs is positive; as Alinder notes, “In the thousands of photographs made of the incarceration process by government photographers, independent documentarians, and prisoners themselves, it is much more difficult to find photographs that portray suffering than it is to find images of smiling faces” (p.12).

After showing several of these WRA images to my students, we discuss the differing stakes for Okubo and the WRA photographers of their photographs. Because the WRA was a civilian agency created to build the internment camps, move the internees from the hastily-constructed assembly centers into the new camps, and hold them there until the war was over, photographers were commissioned with creating a photographic record of the process in order to guard against accusations of brutality. As Alinder points out, “the WRA used photography primarily to publicize and record the work of the government agency and the conformity of those incarcerated to the government’s orders” (2009, p.25). As employees of the government, the WRA photographers would be endangering their jobs by creating images that were contrary to the government’s wishes or positions. Dorothea Lange, for instance, was hired by the WRA but her images were suppressed during the entirety of the war because they were deemed too damaging to the government and the narrative it was trying to construct.

While Okubo has different stakes in the depiction of the camps, they are not entirely dissimilar. Because Okubo was writing at a time when Japanese Americans were leaving the camps to resettle in the Midwestern and eastern parts of the country, she needed to present the internees as not only deserving of freedom and equality, but also as non-threatening and as good potential neighbors. As Greg Robinson points out in “Birth of a Citizen,” contemporary scholars tend to read *Citizen 13660* as work of resistance and don’t pay enough attention to the “specific political context of the wartime period,” especially during the time when Japanese Americans were beginning to leave the camps and settle elsewhere (2008, p.160). Robinson asserts that Okubo and various liberal allies outside the camps were particularly desirous that no images might damage the chances for successful resettlement and “thus it was of central importance to Okubo to humanize herself and other Nisei in order to underline their acceptability as new neighbors to a largely Caucasian audience” (p.168). These concerns, Robinson surmises, must have had an effect on Okubo’s work, even if it was not officially censored. Unlike the WRA photographers, however, Okubo was less concerned about portraying the government or the camps themselves in a positive light.

Okubo and Ansel Adams

In particular, photographs made by Ansel Adams, a Caucasian photographer invited to make a photographic record of the Manzanar War Relocation Center, make for interesting contrasts to Okubo’s illustrations. I ask my students to compare images like Adams’s “Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Shimizu” and “Mr. and Mrs. Henry J. Tsurutani and Baby Bruce” (all of Adams’s

images are available on line or in the book *Manzanar* by Peter Wright, John Armor, and Ansel Adams) with Okubo's illustrations of barracks life on pages 66, 67, and 68. While Adams creates images that emphasize the Spartan cleanliness of the rooms, in which the families appear to be happily pursuing their own interests in surroundings that enable private family life and structure, Okubo's images show the crowding, discomfort, and lack of privacy in the camp as well as the difficulties of maintaining family life in a camp environment. While Adams's pictures show a single unit, Okubo uses a split frame to show how the spaces actually aren't separate but bleed into each other; her images on pages 66 and 67 to show how noise leaks through the incomplete walls and knotholes and how shared, inadequate electrical wires affect the whole barracks. By comparing concrete images that differ in their approach and relationship to camp life, students are able to articulate how Okubo's record differs from Adams's and, thus, how her images counter the images and narrative of the camps that were offered to the public at the time.

Zhou accuses Adams of "aestheticizing" the camps and some photographs can indeed be read this way, although many of my students don't understand at first how this might be seen as problematic. In particular, I ask students to look at Okubo's depiction and description of the dust and dust storms in Topaz with Adam's photograph of one over Manzanar in "Southwest View: Dust Storm Over Manzanar." In Adams's photograph, the dust storm is part of a stunning landscape of the sort for which Adams became justifiably famous. The dust itself is a pale band situated between the flat land and the soaring mountains and cloudscape that dominate the frame. With the emphasis on the clouds and mountains, the photograph is extremely beautiful.

However, Adams does not include in the shot any hint of the camp itself or the people who are expected to live there in the dust; while the presence of the people can be inferred from the title, which does include the camp name, there are no people in the photograph itself. Adams included in his book of photographs on Manzanar a statement of his belief that “the arid splendor of the desert, ringed with towering mountains, has strengthened the spirit of the people of Manzanar” consciously or unconsciously, which can be read as minimizing the wrongs done to the Japanese Americans since, because of their internment, they were exposed to the beneficial landscape (qtd. in Armor and Wright xvii).

On the other hand, Okubo always makes sure that the dust is always shown in the context of the people it affects. The first glimpse the busload of internees get of Topaz is on page 122; the text notes “suddenly, the Central Utah Relocation Project was stretched out before us in a cloud of dust. It was a desolate scene.” The accompanying illustration prominently includes large piles of dirt (which no doubt contributed to the dust, as did the “rough, newly constructed dirt roads” Okubo also describes in the text for that page), two armed soldiers patrolling, and a graphic depiction of the wind and dust using curving lines that cut through the center of the illustration. These elements are not shown isolated from the people to be incarcerated there as the bottom left part of the frame is dominated by five internees gazing out of the bus at the camp.

Likewise, the dust is emphasized on the next page as well. The text notes that the people already interned at Topaz tried to make the newcomers feel welcome with a band and cheering, but it “was impossible to see anything through the dust” (123). The image shows both the already interned and the newly arrived alike hunched over, with hands or clothing attempting to

shield eyes and mouths. Like the previous drawing, Okubo depicts the dust and wind with curved lines that sweep through and around the people as a physical presence (p.123). A few pages later, on page 127, Okubo again returns to the assault of the dust on the people of Topaz. This image includes lines representing the physical force of the wind and the dust against which the five people picture hunch and cover their mouths and eyes; every figure is reacting to the dust as if in pain. The text merely says that “The wind was playing havoc with the fine dust particles,” but the expressions and physical postures of the people in the illustration give emotional resonance to the words and express the extremity of the constant wind and dust (p.127). While Adams’s photograph is a beautiful landscape shot from a distance, Okubo’s drawings and text insist on showing the effects of the wind and dust on the people interned in Topaz.

Conclusion

If one judges by the knowledge my students have of World War II, it is clear that the intervention by Okubo and her allies was insufficient. According to an informal survey I take every semester before teaching *Citizen 13660*, the majority of my students are entirely unaware of the internment of the Japanese Americans and, of those who are aware of it, almost none know any details. There is a new contact zone that arises each time I teach this book in that I must teach students about this part of our history that all too often goes entirely untaught. Students are sometimes reluctant to revise their reductive view of the U.S. as a “good guy,” as many phrase it, in the war, which often results in a new contact zone that must be addressed through education.

Furthermore, our extended discussion of Okubo, the internment, and the contact zone prepares my students to discuss more recent works and events, which often occasions even more pointed and engaged discussion. By explicitly using the frame of the contact zone, however, students are able to move beyond their already-entrenched views in order to see the competing groups and discourses more clearly. While discussion remains lively, I find that, by focusing on the contact zone, students are able to engage in productive discussion rather than simple recitation of pre-framed positions.

I have successfully used Okubo and our discussion of the contact zone as a bridge to a number of different texts and topics. For instance, I have assigned *Citizen 13660* immediately before viewing *My America . . . or Honk If You Love Buddha*, Renee Tajima-Peña's 1997 documentary in which she interviews a variety of Asian Americans, including a young Korean American political activist, a Cambodian telemarketer, a Laotian refugee, Chinese American debutantes, eight generation Filipino sisters, among others, in order to explore the breadth of Asian American experience. The contact zone can illuminate several episodes in the documentary, especially one in which long-time activist Yuri Kochiyama travels to the site of Jerome, the camp where she and her family were interned during World War II, only to find it gone. As Kochiyama and her husband stand gazing at the empty landscape, a white farmer, John Earnest Arlington, drives up in his truck and engages the couple in conversation. He reveals that he was in fact the one in charge of bulldozing the camp. While the three struggle to connect in front of Tajima-Peña's camera, the conversation ends positively as Arlington reveals the empathy he developed for the internees during and after the war. Rather than a picture of the

camp, Kochiyama takes a picture of the farmer who, despite his role in destroying the remains of the camp, “ironically signifies historical memory” (Creef, *Imaging*, 5). Viewing this scene through the lens of contact zone theory allows students to discuss the differing stakes Arlington and Kochiyama have in the memory of the camps and the possibilities for connection.

In another pedagogical experiment, I followed *Citizen 13660* with Hannah Weyer’s 2000 documentary *La Boda/The Wedding*. *La Boda* follows the Luises, a Mexican American family of migrant farm workers, through their preparations for their daughter’s wedding. During her wedding preparations, Elizabeth Luis and various relatives move back and forth across the U.S./Mexico border, meeting with family members on both sides, seeking bargains, and planning her reception. Our discussion of migration, both forced and voluntary, in Okubo’s work prepares us to examine Weyer’s film through contact zone theory and thus move beyond the already determined frames of the issue. We discuss the differences between Okubo, who records her own impressions and experiences, versus the Luises, whose story is told by a filmmaker who is not part of their community. Like our discussions of the matrix of images that Okubo’s work responds to, we bring in examples of contemporary media images of Mexican Americans in order to see what groups are struggling for control of the images and meaning of immigration and migrants, and we discuss how their discourses differ.

Finally, last spring, I used our discussions of Okubo and the contact zone to begin an unplanned discussion of the *New York Post* cartoons that made a connection between President Obama and the chimpanzee that mauled a woman in Hartford Connecticut. Again, rather than remaining within preset terms for debate (was the cartoon racist or were those who saw racism in

it “too sensitive,” for instance), our discussion of the World War II internment and the surrounding legacy of images prepared us to excavate a similar history of disturbing imagery linked with African Americans. Like the internment, my students were largely unaware of the longstanding racially-motivated convention in America that links African Americans with gorillas, chimpanzees, and other apes. I show several images from various points in American history that make this connection. I began the discussion with an illustration from *Types of Mankind* (1854) that contrasted the Greek statue of Apollo, a drawing of an African man, and a chimpanzee in order to “prove” the inferiority of Africans and then I bring the discussion up to the 2008 *Vogue* cover of LeBron James and Gisele Bündchen uncomfortably reminiscent of advertising images for the 1933 film *King Kong*. Again, this matrix of images can be viewed through the contact zone and I discuss with my students the clashes over representation and meaning that have surrounded African Americans in the U.S.

Okubo's *Citizen 13660* offers plenty of material for close reading as well as a provocative introduction to contact zone theory, which gives students new lenses to view contemporary clashes over meaning. This new way of looking and thinking about contemporary issues can aid in “opening minds to difference,” which, as John Gaughan points out, should be a crucial component of contemporary pedagogy (2001, p.9).

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SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Comics in the Contact Zone*

Article 6

1-1-2010

Rationale For Pride of Baghdad

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Recommended Citation

Hill, Crag Ph.D. (2010) "Rationale For Pride of Baghdad," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol1/iss1/6>

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Pride of Baghdad

By Brian K. Vaughan, Art by Niko Henrichon

Rationale by Crag Hill

Grade Level and Audience

Pride of Baghdad is recommended for mature high school literature classes. The novel would be an excellent supplementary text in social studies classes focusing on the Iraq war, as well as in a science class exploring animal behavior.

Plot Summary

Pride of Baghdad is a fictionalized version of a true story about a pride of lions who escape from the Baghdad Zoo at the onset of the Iraq war. The pride consists of four lions: Zill, the alpha male; Safa, a female who had lived in the wild; Noor, a revolution-spouting lioness; and her eager cub, Ali. As an allegory, each of the four lions represents different elements of Iraqi society. Zill seems too reticent to be the alpha male, the pride's leader, but he proves himself later on as a fierce protector; Safa and Noor are often at odds on what freedom means, Safa, having experienced the relative lawlessness of the wild, satisfied with the status quo, while Noor advocates forceful change; and Ali is earnest, his primal instincts bursting through though he has only known life in the zoo.

The narrative shifts between sudden action and reflective interludes. The action starts immediately. After the first panel foreshadows the ominous plot, a black bird calling over and over again, "The sky is falling, the sky is falling," three American jets screech across the sky. The adult lions are thunderstruck, while Ali is beside himself with excitement. The scene cuts to Noor plotting with an antelope to liberate the zoo. In her plan, the antelope will gore the keepers and take the keys, and then the monkeys will unlock the cages. The antelope balks, believing open cages will result in the massacre of his kind. The scene swings to Safa and Zill talking about hunting in the wild. Ali asks what hunting was like, a query Safa does not respond to, flashing back to a time when she was raped and assaulted (she lost an eye) by males from another territory. Ali asks Zill the same question, but Zill's sole memory is of watching a sunset as if feasting on prey.

The plot accelerates. After dumping a donkey corpse into the lion's environment, the keepers flee. The zoo is bombed, cages and buildings destroyed. Safa wants to stay in the zoo, choosing the known, even it is as a captive, over the unknown. When another explosion separates Zill and Ali, monkeys kidnap Ali. They carry him to their island where Safa intervenes. She kills a monkey, freeing Ali, realizing after such an action she will have to leave the zoo because the monkeys will now seek revenge. As they depart,

Noor keeps her word to the antelopes, allowing one to escape rather than killing it for much-needed food.

Outside the zoo, Safa and Ali encounter a turtle that recounts recent Iraqi history, including memories of the 1991 war when his family and many other turtles were drowned in an oil spill. In a warehouse, Ali finds a dead, bloodied human. The pride debates whether to eat the corpse or to remain loyal to the zoo keepers who fed and housed them. Safa, true to character, refuses to eat the human. Noor spies a small herd of white horses which they begin to stalk. An explosion spooks the horses. They sprint off with the pride in pursuit, drawing the lions deeper into the decimated city. Safa and Noor enter a palace where they discover a de-clawed, toothless lion. Safa argues that the keepers would not have treated an animal in this way. They confront a formerly captive bear that threatens to kill them. Safa and Noor attack but are stricken down. Zill arrives and rises to their defense, but the bear beats him down. They both fall hard to the ground. Ali, assuming Zill's protector role, stampedes the horses which trample the bear.

The climax is abrupt. The pride climbs up to a roof to view the fireflies (tracers) they noticed from the streets. On the roof, in view of a sunset, Zill is shot by snipers. Safa, in defense, attacks but is mowed down. Shocked, Ali and Noor are killed in a hail of bullets.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

Pride of Baghdad is an allegory. First and foremost, the narrative can be understood on the surface level with minimum knowledge of recent Iraqi history. The novel pulls us into a place and time we have only read or heard about in the news. We are present and in danger when U.S. planes bomb Baghdad and when U.S. troops advance into the city. The lions are creatures we do not want harmed. We flinch and cringe when they are in the middle of bombing. Where the news coverage of these events was screened, and this novel puts a face on innocent victims.

On the allegorical level, the narrative comments on Iraqi society pre- and post-war. To comprehend this level, students will need to generate background knowledge of the different positions Iraqis took during and after the Saddam Hussein regime. The authors, however, leave interpretations open; there is no one group of people that Noor, Safa, Zill and Ali represent. The pride could also be representative of other societies, of other historical events, allowing for many possible allegorical readings.

Pride of Baghdad provides a provocative perspective on the burning question, what is the nature of freedom? The four characters – representing different positions in relation to the concept of freedom – offer different answers to what it means to be captive, to be taken from one's natural environment, to have one's instincts restrained. Students will

energetically wrestle with comments such as Noor's, "There's an old saying, Zill. Freedom can't be given, only earned."

The novel affords a study in how dialogue shapes characters. Although not always naturalistic, the dialogue defines the characters. Zill's level-headedness, Noor's fiery revolutionary rhetoric, Safa's world-weariness, and Ali's eagerness all come through in their speeches.

The novel helps to break down stereotypes. In wartime, citizens of the opposition are demonized or ignored. In *Pride of Baghdad*, the keepers, Iraqis, though we never meet any up close, are depicted sympathetically until the scene in the palace which sets the contrast between the people and the brutal rulers. Iraqi people are human; Uday Hussein, who maintained his own private zoo, was brutal.

Possible Objections

Many readers will find the flashback to when Safa was raped and assaulted difficult to view. Other disturbing images – a giraffe with its head exploded by a mortar shell, images of a tortured lion and bear, and the pride being riddled by gunfire – will upset readers of any age. Because the main characters are animals, the kind of characters you might meet in a children's book or Disney film, readers may be particularly troubled by the violence.

Some readers may also perceive that the novel presents the American invasion in a negative light. American soldiers are responsible for the deaths of the innocent lions. Though American soldiers killed the lions, those soldiers are shown to be distressed by what they had to do, underscoring the complexity of such events.

Ideas for Implementation

To start, have students collect anthropomorphic tales. Ask students to answer in discussion or in writing the question, Why tell stories from the point of view of animals? Using the criterion that these tales cast light on our humanity or inhumanity, compare/contrast these tales (e.g. compare/contrast "The Lion King" with *Pride of Baghdad*). In these tales, what do we learn about being human?

Also before reading, ask students to read the articles about the event the novel is based upon (see references below). The articles have the journalistic minimum, the who, what, where, when, and why of the event. Ask students to make predictions about how the

writer and artist will fill out this story. What will the lions do from the time they escape the zoo until their deaths?

As a project that begins before reading and could serve as an assessment of the reading, ask students to write an allegory in which a coterie of animals escape into their city or their school. First, ask them to create categories of people in their town, focusing on the different ways that these groups perceive the town and its residents, e.g. how the business community views teenagers. Pick an animal that represents each category. In the course of the narrative—which could be done in comics style--what do these animals show the reader about the town, what do these animals learn?

Images are at least as important to the narrative as dialogue. During reading, then, ask students to look closely at the drawings, keeping a list of details, especially of those found in panels without dialogue, that accentuate the themes the writer and artist are developing.

After reading, conduct four corner debates on statements such as, "There's an old saying, Zill. Freedom can't be given, only earned" and the lions die as free animals. In four corner debates, students start in one of the four corners of the room according to whether they strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement. One of the goals of the debate is to coax others into your corner.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

In a world literature class *Pride of Baghdad* would fit well into a unit featuring Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Set in pre-colonial Africa, *Things Fall Apart* also shows what happens to a society in the face of a violent clash with an outside culture.

As a representation of what can happen to civilians, *Pride of Baghdad* would make a tight thematic weave with any novel about war. In particular, it could be braided with *The Things They Carry* by Tim O'Brien, several stories in the novel exploring the effects of violence on both combatants and non-combatants. The study of one particular story, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," read in light of *Pride of Baghdad*, could be understood to a deeper degree as a depiction of what happens to people when societal order breaks down.

Novels such as *Watership Down*, *Animal Farm*, the Redwall series, and *Tales of Desperaux*, would be enhanced in braiding with *Pride of Baghdad*. One possible thematic inquiry could answer the question, why tell stories with animals in human situations? What do these stories tell us about ourselves?

Awards

Best Graphic Novel, 2006, IGN.com

Editor's Pick, Library Journal, January 2, 2006

Reviews

"...an engaging and well-meaning read" – Andrew D. Arnold, Time.com¹

"it deserves the plaudits for its exploration of the price of freedom, the nature of tyranny, and the effect that both can have on the civilian mindset in a country like Iraq" – David Wallace. Comics Bulletin²

"...simply, lavishly drawn, and devastating....Stunning" – *Publisher's Weekly*

"...in the hands of Vaughan the story becomes a piece of unforgettable modern literature and is well deserving of the designation of "classic" – Chris Wilson, *The Graphic Classroom*³

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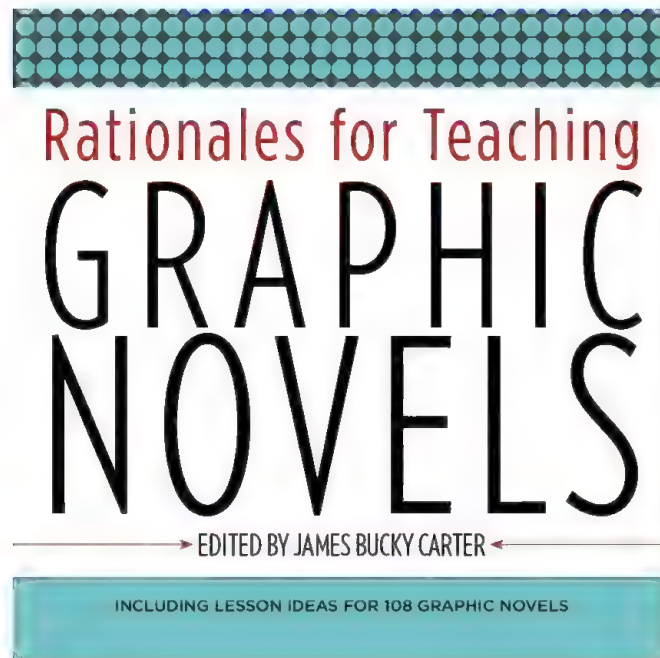
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⁹ <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6345425.html>

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SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Comics in the Contact Zone*

Article 7

1-1-2010

Rationale For Magneto: Testament

Brian Kelley

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Recommended Citation

Kelley, Brian (2010) "Rationale For Magneto: Testament," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol1/iss1/7>

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X-Men: Magneto Testament (2009)

By Gregory Pak and Carmine Di Giandomenico

Rationale by Brian Kelley

Grade Level and Audience

This graphic novel is recommended for middle and high school English and social studies classes.

Plot Summary

Before there was the complex X-Men villain Magneto, there was Max Eisenhardt. As a boy, Max has a loving family: a father who tinkers with jewelry, an overprotective mother, a sickly sister, and an uncle determined to teach him how to be a ladies' man. He goes to high school, is a stellar student academically, and even beats (twice) the school's leading jock in javelin competitions. He's the victim of bullying by peers and teachers. And he has a beautiful muse named Magda. He is a typical adolescent boy. The setting: Nazi Germany.

The target of systematic racism at school because he is Jewish, Max is not only forced to defend his honor but is emotionally and physically humiliated by teachers and peers professing the superiority of the German race. He watches Herr Kalb, a mentor, beaten and carried from the school after defending Max. His uncle, Erich, becomes a victim of public assault and humiliation because he's in the company of a German woman. His family, fearing for survival, leaves the city and tries hiding.

Losing his family to a firing squad, Max is forced to survive independently. Though not fully an adult and more a creature of instinct, he survives in the wilderness and on the streets. Eventually captured and interred in a concentration camp, Max is again saved by Herr Kalb who encourages him to work for survival and teaches him how to survive in the concentration camps. Still Max is a creature of instinct, listening to the Nazi soldiers in order to survive.

When he sees that Magda is in a neighboring camp, still holding onto a necklace he made her while in school, he becomes determined to help her survive. Determination to help her survive, although helping him regain his humanity (i.e., no longer only interested in survival), also causes him to endure more horrors, including digging gold from the teeth of corpses to bribe guards. His determination to save her becomes a determination to help others in the concentration camp as well, and he enters adulthood not only by leading but by inspiring.

Pak and Giandomenico paint a poignant and realistic picture of life in a concentration camp and the impact such a life has on the physical and psychological health of its prisoners. The struggles of adolescent boy trying to survive the horrors, slowly losing his own humanity until inspired by another, illustrate the horrific sense pain and yet hope embodied in human nature.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

The Holocaust, one of the most horrific incidents in the history of mankind, has been the topic of numerous books for young adults. While *Magneto Testament* offers no new insight into the tragedy of the Holocaust, the authors' abilities to capture the effects of the Holocaust on human life is as artistically rendered as in other pieces of literature.

The text not only works as a graphic novel, but the format lends itself to exploring the reality of the Holocaust, a reality some students have difficulty visualizing. The artist carefully depicts the sensitive nature of the Holocaust, especially the portrayal of corpses, to avoid dehumanizing the loss of human life. At the same time, the artist avoids illustrations which show any sensuality or beauty when depicting the Nazis or their brutality, helping students form powerful understandings of brutality inherent in the actions of the Nazis.

Unlike *Maus*, which makes use of cartoon animals as main characters, *Magneto Testament* is realistic in its depictions of characters. Though the symbolism of Spiegelman's text is significant to the story of *Maus*, the use of human characters in *Magneto Testament* will help students more clearly see connections between their own lives and actions and those of the characters. Connections not only help students relate to characters and better understand conflicts but also help struggling and apathetic readers attend to the elements of the story. While struggling readers may find it difficult to understand symbolic characterization in *Maus*, the human quality of characters in *Magneto Testament* helps students find immediate connections.

Magneto Testament is, in essence, a young adult novel depicting the horrors of the Holocaust and featuring a realistic adolescent male protagonist. Not only do adolescent readers respond well when protagonists are adolescents who are portrayed realistically, male readers tend to respond more positively to male characters. Many struggling readers are males who find it difficult to sustain interest in characters and plot. Max is not only a realistic male protagonist who is a teenager, readers will also become invested in learning how he survives the Holocaust, a storyline heretofore not attempted in the annals of comics history. Many students, particularly males, will know the character of Magneto from comic books, providing them with schema to make the elements of the text not only more memorable but also emotional.

Possible Objections

The story of *Magneto Testament* is certainly situated in the X-Men and Marvel universes, and this is likely to cause some teachers to hesitate using the text in the classroom. After all, one might wonder about the literary quality of “comics” even though he/she already invests in graphic novels for the classroom. While the story is about an adolescent version of one of the most notorious comic-book villains of all time, there is only one slight hint of the fantasy nature of the X-Men universe in the text itself. While facing a firing squad with his family, Max is able to survive while all members of his family are murdered. In many ways, this is reminiscent of magical realism (or fate) and not a suggestion of “mutant powers.” Because he must survive independently, become a voice for revolution, and keep his beloved alive, he has to be thrust into adulthood (like many characters from young adult novels). To do such, the authors must isolate Max from all adults and make him responsible for his own life. A minute break with reality to help their character to survive will likely cause no less confusion since suspension of disbelief is so often necessary for reading literature in general.

The artwork in *Magneto Testament* unifies the text, helping to make the Holocaust reality. Though images in the text are certainly horrific, sometimes bordering on the grotesque, there is no moment where either artwork or text appears gratuitous and instead both are constantly painting a sensitive and yet moving tribute to that reality. In some instances, whole black pages with little text remind us of the severity of loss and at no time is the loss or the Nazi party beautified or glorified.

Some teachers may also argue that the depictions of the Nazis (and pro-Nazi Germans) are flat and static while the depictions of the concentration camps’ prisoners are robust and dynamic. Certainly making the perpetrators heinous and uninteresting and the victims wholly opposite is vital to painting a moral picture, a picture which is inferred and never direct. The authors *do not* spend time painting a fine line between the Nazis, showing those who were sympathetic to the cause versus those who feared for their own families’ lives, and the story certainly justifies their depictions. In a testimonial we are offered the perspective of the victim. Enduring the Holocaust as Max did, one can see that the flat depictions of the Nazis as pure evil with no gradations is certainly in line with the experiences and suffering. While we could ask our students to think about whether the victim has a) the responsibility to see the other side as human and b) paint the other side as human, we understand the need to consistently paint those who slaughtered millions as evil.

The idea that this fictional text is referred to as a “testimonial” may also cause some difficulty. Testimonials are represented as realistic depictions of witnessing. The horrors unfurled in testimonials are scarcely the imaginings of fiction and, though the perspective of one individual, make many of us seethe with rage against those inflicting such torment and suffering. To refer, then, to a fictional text as “testimonial” can certainly cause alarm, and perhaps rightfully so. However, as a text that tells the story of the Holocaust from the perspective of Max Eisenhardt, the power of the narrative lies not in recounting the “witnessing” but in provoking the reader into critical and engaged discourse about

genocide. If fictional characters bring our students to such conversations, and if investment in human life comes from investment in fictional life, then we must begin where we can best reach our students.

Ideas for Implementation

Magneto Testament is an excellent text to situate in any unit on Holocaust and/or genocide studies, whether as a central or ancillary text used to further the purpose of the unit. The text is accompanied by a teachers' guide and features numerous ideas for implementation which can further discussion across disciplines¹.

Because *Magneto Testament* is a visual text conveying information with both images and language, creating lessons using visual images, language, movement, and music can help students think about the Holocaust in multi-sensory ways. Multi-sensory learning can assist students to acquire and retain information learned while reading and can help extend student learning. Typically teachers rely on language-based texts, such as *Night* or the *Diary of Anne Frank*, to relay information about the Holocaust. Though these books are emotionally appealing, students are not employing all their senses to understand the topic. Students could create readers' theatre or dramatic performances of the text, listen to music (such as fugues) played in concentration camps, listen to recordings of oral histories of life in the Holocaust, and even study artistic representations of the Holocaust (including film representations). The teachers' guide¹ also suggests particular panels in the text that can lead to conversations about the relationship between art and language.

Ideas for Thematic Braiddings

Night, *Maus I & II*, and *Diary of Anne Frank* would make excellent texts to use in conjunction with this graphic novel in a unit on Holocaust literature. Expanding such a unit to be inclusive of other genocides might allow for opportunities to use texts such as *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda*, *Speak, Rwanda*, and/or *We Regret to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families*.

Awards

2010 ALA Top Ten Books For Teens²

Reviews

"Words never suffice to describe the pain of the victims of WWII, but this collaboration by Pak and Di Giandomenico truly reaches your heart" – Luis Alejandro Chavez³

“What easily could have been a splashy tabloid take on a somber subject stays focused thanks to Carmine Di Giandomenico's slightly restrained and stark art style. It remains a deafening reminder of man's inhumanity to man. "We must never forget" rings throughout” – Joseph Szadkowski, *The Washington Times*⁴

Resources/References:

Magneto Testament Weblink Resources: <http://www.pakbuzz.com/entries/001861.shtml>

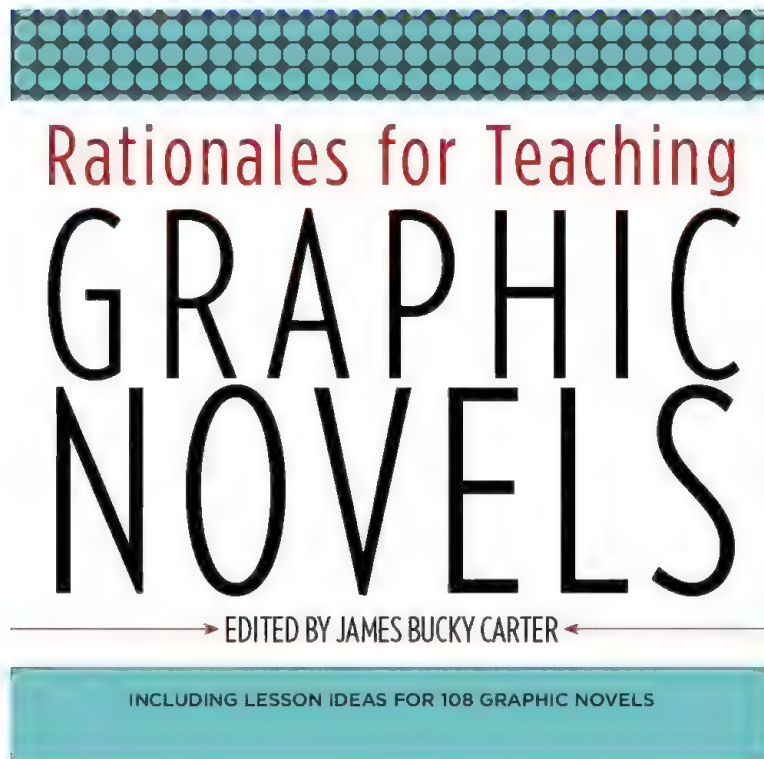
¹Kelley, B. (2009). *X-Men: Magneto testament: Teachers' guide*. New York: Marvel Comics Inc.

² <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsawards/greatgraphicnovelsforteens/ggnt10.cfm>

³ <http://www.amazon.com/X-Men-Magneto-Testament-Greg-Pak/dp/0785138234>

⁴ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jul/01/zadzooks-comic-book-reviews-batman-aliens/>

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SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Comics in the Contact Zone*

Article 8

1-1-2010

Review of Teaching Graphic Novels, By Katie Monnin

Susan Spangler

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Recommended Citation

Spangler, Susan (2010) "Review of Teaching Graphic Novels, By Katie Monnin," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol1/iss1/8>

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Review of Katie Monnin's *Teaching Graphic Novels:*

Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom

By Susan Spangler

In the introduction to her book, *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom* (Maupin House 2010), Katie Monnin recalls the day she realized the importance of teaching graphic literature to students: September 11, 2001. Monnin realized that most of her students had no idea how to process the images they saw on the news that day, and she wanted to remedy that situation. Today's students, who according to the National Council of Teachers of English (2008) need "a wide range of abilities and competencies in order to be considered literate , must have instruction in managing and processing the streams of information they are bombarded with on a minutely basis from a variety of sources and in a variety of forms. Whether they turn on Sports Center or open up their Facebook page, students simultaneously see images, read text, listen to audio and watch streaming video. In *Teaching Graphic Novels*, Monnin teaches educators how to help students manage these streams of information with specific lessons on developing a graphic novel vocabulary, story mapping, and other metacognitive skills. Monnin's book is a good start in teaching students to understand the complexities of multimedia environments.

Monnin clearly knows her subjects, both graphic literature and education. As a classroom teacher, Monnin speaks from personal experience, and she advocates a metacognitive approach in the sample lessons included in *Teaching Graphic Novels*. Early lessons in the book call for student metacognition as they take ownership of their reading processes by articulating

their understanding of both the words and images they are decoding in graphic novels. In one lesson, for example, students label the reading strategies they are using to read different kinds of panels in a text. In later lessons, students make personal connections (by articulating the “text potential”) and retell a graphic story. Metacognition is again involved when students reflect on what they already know about a story and relate it to their own lives. The reading strategies Monnin advances in her lessons are simple but effective: Have students tell you what they know and propose ways to learn what they don’t.

As an experienced teacher, I appreciated the tone Monnin creates in the book. She takes on the tone of a colleague, treating readers as knowledgeable and competent by showing them *how* to think about the medium, not *what* to think about specific books. Each lesson, for instance, encourages teachers to select a graphic novel of their choice; each lesson can apply to *any* graphic novel, not one specific one. She knows that readers can discern their own students’ abilities and will be able to make informed decisions about what will work in their classrooms for students of different grades levels and different reading abilities. This was especially evident in the chapter on English Language Learners, in which Monnin adeptly proves that good teaching is helpful for improving ALL students’ comprehension, not just ELLs’. The author specifically addresses the needs of ELLs with an informational chart on the stages of language learning as well as detailed suggestions for activities tailored for each level. Activities such as the creation of vocabulary index cards that Monnin offers are suitable not only for ELLs but for all students in developing their language skills.

Because she is a classroom teacher, Monnin also anticipates my questions about some of her lessons (“Do students *really* need to do three worksheets for one lesson?”) and satisfactorily

explains the rationale for the lessons' methodology ("Yes, because the NCTE/IRA ELA standards mandate that students use a variety of strategies to comprehend literary texts, and each worksheet helps students practice and demonstrate a different cognitive strategy"). The use of so many worksheets seemed to me at first like overkill, but the author provides a rationale that's hard to argue against. Like any good teacher, Monnin pays attention to ELA standards and articulates how her lessons meet them. The clear link between the lessons and standards both shows Monnin's extensive background in education and justifies the formal teaching of graphic literature.

The only stumble in the book is the section on middle- and high-school persuasive writing assignments, which are a bit muddled in purpose and format, and which direct students away from authentic kinds of writing. These writing assignments ask students to write a persuasive essay that compares/contrasts elements of story in a graphic novel and print-text novel. No audience or authentic forum is suggested for this academic exercise. While the assignment recommends that students use a comparison/contrast strategy in organizing their paragraphs, there is no advice on what students are to persuade their (hypothetical) reader of, making these writing assignments confusing.

The step-by-step lessons, adapted for different grades levels, are clearly the greatest strength of *Teaching Graphic Novels*, and they are supplemented by the appendices, which contain everything from classroom handouts to reference lists for further reading on graphic literature to lists of traditional novels that have been adapted into graphic ones. Other strengths include Monnin's ideas for teaching both middle-school creative writing and media literacy with graphic novels. If you're just getting started with graphic literature, this book (along with the

blog of the same name at <http://teachinggraphicnovels.blogspot.com>) is a primer that will spark many ideas to keep you investigating the medium for months to come.

Sources

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SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Comics in the Contact Zone*

Article 9

1-1-2010

Comic Vision

Gale Acuff

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Recommended Citation

Acuff, Gale (2010) "Comic Vision," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol1/iss1/9>

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Comic Vision

On my bedroom floor I'm reading funny books, mostly superheroes, four-color and two-dimensional. Evil gives them a good fight but can never defeat them, not even in a continued story from last month's issue to this month's, or this month's to next's. I'm only nine years old and won't know the world is sick until I'm grown, and wicked, too, like a bad stepmother.

I paid twelve cents, plus a penny tax, for this copy of *Detective*, featuring Batman and Robin--I like their costumes --uniforms, I mean--and Robin is a kid only a little older than I am, though I identify with Batman more: nobody knows this man behind that mask of the night, and he wears a cape and sports that utility belt, which is full of surprises. I try to make one myself but I can't keep the empty pill bottles taped to my belt--they fall off in action and Mother will kill me if I glue them on with mucilage or papier-mache.

At the end of every patrol Batman and Robin return to Wayne Manor, where Alfred the butler is waiting and soon they're Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson again. They're rich and that's good--below, in the Batcave, are wonderful devices which only money can buy, and Bruce's brain designs.

I don't have a butler but there's Mother --she does all the things a butler does but a lot less formally. No computer here --it's 1965--but I've got a Timex and transistor radio. I've got no sidekick but then there's my dog, who's lying on his brown side on the rug. What he's missing in smarts he makes up for by being loyal--not that Robin's not. Or sometimes I call him Ace the Bat-hound when I'm tired of Robin and go solo.

I wish I had a uniform. Mother won't sew me one. *Don't be silly*, she says.

And besides, you should be reading classics.
She means *The Last of the Mohicans* and
Moby Dick. And *Huckleberry Finn* and
The Call of the Wild and *Little Women*.
Wuthering Heights and *The Little Lame Prince*.
But there are too many big words and folks
in the past write and talk funny. One day
I'll read 'em all to see what all the fuss
is for, but for now great literature
belongs to the future, when it's too late
to teach evil a lesson it won't soon
forget, at least until next month's issue.
I figure I've got time enough to lose
what I am now. *Comics are for children*,
Father says. *You're a big boy now--fourth grade.*

On the last page of the story Bruce Wayne
and Dick Grayson are smiling, the Riddler
safely back in a cell, where he belongs.
All that's left is the letters page, and ads
for X-ray specs, American Seeds, and
Sea Monkeys. I'll save them for tomorrow.
I don't ever expect to be Batman

though I might have a dream of him tonight.
But I don't want to be Ishmael, either,
or Huck or Natty Bumppo or Jo March
--I'm too young to be serious, I think,
like they are. Not that I've read their books but
one day I'll have to--that's *education*.
And then I'll get a job and forget them.
For now, I'm happy not knowing too much:

crime must pay because there's so much of it
and truth has a secret identity
behind the face of evil and even
good, too. On Monday I'll return to school
and let Teacher think I'm learning something.
better than what we both already guess.

--Gale Acuff

1-1-2010

Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, and Comics

Brian Kelley

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Recommended Citation

Kelley, Brian (2010) "Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, and Comics," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol1/iss1/10>

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Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, & Comics

"ANYONE INTERESTED IN COMICS, FROM THE CASUAL
BROWSER TO THE SEASONED PROFESSIONAL,
WILL LEARN SOMETHING NEW BY READING THIS PAPER."

- GENE YANG*

*Quoted in: Anthony Browne (2000), First Second Books; Linda Chu & the New Yorker Online (2005), SLIC Publishing;
Gordon Lumsden, King of the Code (2008), SLIC Publishing); cartoonist, The Comics Book (2000), First Second Books)

Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, & Comics

Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, and Comics: A Position Paper

A Collaborative Position Paper Co-Sponsored by the **New Jersey Reading Association**, state affiliate of the International Reading Association And **Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Graphic Novels Special Interest Group** of the International Reading Association

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WHAT ARE GRAPHIC NOVELS?

Typically, graphic novels are bound books featuring sequential art. Though the phrase “graphic novel” typically suggests a genre to some readers, the phrase is indicative of a form of media which spans and supports a multitude of genres, including science fiction, poetry, or creative nonfiction (Carter, 2008). They range from novellas, original novel-length narratives, autobiographies, biographies, collections of comic strips (typically around a central theme or storyline), collections of serialized comic books around a single story-arc, collections of short stories or vignettes, and compiled anthologies featuring the work of multiple authors. The purpose of works written as graphic novels ranges from evoking pleasure to informing to satirizing.

Graphic novels may be single volume (like *American Born Chinese*), multi-volume (like *Buddha*) or available as either multi-volume or a single-volume compilation (like *Bone*). Though this may seem unique to the format of graphic novels, traditional texts may also be single volume, multi-volume, or originally published in multiple volumes but now available in a single book, like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Like some traditional novels, such as Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or the works of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, many graphic novels have been serialized in other formats like comic books and even on the Internet, as in the case of *American Born Chinese* and *Grease Monkey*, prior to being bound into a book.

WHAT ARE SEQUENTIAL ART AND VISUAL NARRATIVE?

Sequential art (Eisner, 1985) features a series of panels that convey a single story. These panels can continue for a single page or for multiple pages and may or may not be framed. Eisner also coined the term visual narratives (Eisner, 1996) to refer to texts that convey stories through images and words. Single panel cartoons, frequently with captions instead of thought-balloons, may tell a self-contained story but are not sequential art. In other words, though there is a melding and interdependence of word(s) and image, there is no sequence of ideas or concepts. Because sequential art tells a story through multiple panels, the placement of panels is as significant as the placement and use of words.

The grammar of visual storytelling requires that the graphic novelist think critically about how he/she wants to tell the story (McCloud, 1993). In graphic novels employing words, emphasis on language is not displaced by additional emphasis on the image, and the two are used and combined by graphic novelists showing the interdependence of image and text. This requires that he/she pay careful attention to the placement of panels, images, and ideas as well as considering the words he/she uses. Sequential art and visual narrative require that a reader connect multiple images to multiple words, continuously integrating information of language and image from one panel to the next to comprehend an entire story (McCloud, 1993).

HOW HAVE GRAPHIC NOVELS/SEQUENTIAL ART DEVELOPED?

Will Eisner is recognized as one of the most influential writers to employ sequential art and publish in the form of graphic novels. He is remembered for works like *Contract with God* as well as the comic series *The Spirit*. However, Eisner (1985) acknowledges that he was influenced by the comic book industry (he had also published a comic series known as *The Spirit*) as well as the German woodcutters, including Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel. The German woodcutters published wordless texts that featured many of the same elements of a graphic novel. Typically these texts were centered around socialist themes that focused on the worker or the common man and his plight. Some of these works were censored during the age of McCarthyism because of their socialist and perhaps even anti-racist sentiments.

Some individuals may argue that books told with cartoons that are not sequential in nature, such as the Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, also fit into the category of "graphic novel." Other books often referred to as graphic novels, like Selznick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* or Binder's and Tetzner's *Black Brothers*, meld images to illuminate ideas contained in the text differently than sequential art. In these formats, the images are important to the storyline; however, a) the author does not rely on a melding between image and language to tell the story, b) images and text are often separated from one another, and c) the author does not use sequential (linear or progressive) illustrations/images to convey a story.

Some graphic novels, like some picture books, can be completely wordless, such as *Flotsam* by David Weisner. These books connect image to thought which is also connected to language. As readers make meaning from images, they continuously utilize language to interpret, break-down, and comprehend an image. In graphic novels, including wordless graphic novels, readers apply this skill to multiple images while also synthesizing or integrating knowledge from prior panels. Graphic novels like Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, Milt Gross' *He Done Her Wrong*, and Sara Varon's *Robot Dreams* follow in the German woodcutter tradition of using images alone to convey a story. Readers exposed to wordless picture books would not necessarily find it difficult to read wordless graphic novels, despite the complexity of text structure.

Eisner's works, both his graphic novels and his comics (especially *The Plot*), were political, as they were written by a Jewish man in an overtly Christian country. Though many of his works included Jewish characters and, sometimes, their relationship to their religion, such as *Contract with God*, the storylines, moral issues, and characters were universal and appealed to individuals throughout the United States. With his widely successful *The Spirit* comics, Eisner reached and impacted multiple generations of readers, helping him to become one of the most successful Jewish writers in American history.

Many graphic novels today are no less political, with authors creating texts that have universal appeal while dealing with issues of forming identity. Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, Gordon Yamamoto, *King of the Geeks*, and *Loyola Chin and the San Peligran Order* deal with universal themes while focusing on issues of racism, prejudice, bullying, and cults, issues educators need to deal with when developing lessons on character education. Students who have never witnessed the Holocaust or Rwandan genocide can scarcely comprehend the horror of these events. Images in graphic novels like, *Maus*, *X-Men: Magneto Testament*, *Deogratias*, and *Safe-Area Gorazde* help readers to visualize the realities of war and genocide.

HOW IS SEQUENTIAL ART OR VISUAL NARRATIVE ALIKE (AND DIFFERENT) FROM TRADITIONAL TEXTS?

Like traditional pieces of fiction or creative nonfiction which rely solely (or mainly) on words to tell a story, fictional or creative nonfiction sequential art features exposition, rising action, plateau, climax, falling action, denouement, and closing. It also features plot, character, theme, motif, and conflict, which may be internal and/or external. Gene Luen Yang's award-winning *American-Born Chinese* or Jeff Smith's *Bone* series are examples of fiction books written in graphic novel format. Of course, these elements are also found in graphic novel memoirs like Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Spiegelman's *Maus*. In essence, all elements of literature can be found in both fictional and creative nonfiction graphic novels and traditional texts. Graphic novels can be evaluated for the same literary elements as traditional texts, are of equal literary merit, and can be used to build background knowledge and foster intertextuality (Carter, 2007a).

Nonfiction sequential art is kin to traditional nonfiction as it presents information for purposes of educating or informing. As an example, *The Plot* by Will Eisner shares the history of the *Protocol of the Elders of Zion*, a controversial, and plagiarized, text that influenced twentieth-century history. Like a research paper or text, Eisner includes a bibliography of resources. The *9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, presents crucial information from the actual *9/11 Report* released by the 9/11 Commission, but in an accessible and reader-friendly format. Biographies of Malcolm X, Ronald Reagan, and J. Edgar Hoover, published by Hill and Wang, are also examples of graphic novels that are nonfiction.

In children's picture books authors and illustrators typically work to create a unity between image and word, though either words or pictures may take more importance in a specific book. Even in chapter books and young adult novels like the *Edgar & Ellen* series and *Harry Potter*, authors typically frame a chapter with an image that can help readers anticipate the material contained in the chapter. In sequential art and visual narrative, however, the pictures conveyed through multiple panels work together with words to tell a story or provide information to a reader. While the image sometimes enhances the meaning of the text, frequently the image and text work in concert throughout multiple panels and are symbiotic in nature. The reader must pay careful attention to both image and word, understanding how the two work together, to clearly comprehend worded graphic novels.

When looking at Figure 1, readers attempt to reconcile the language with the image. In traditionally printed text, the use of three "hellos" may indicate fear, confusion, or frustration; the connotation depends upon prior events. However, the expression of the woman's face, including the startled eyes, helps readers to see that she is excited. The inclusion of the three "hellos" in this panel reinforces that she is anxious, showing how both image and word work together to relay a message. The contrast between light and dark in this panel also suggests a growing tension between awareness of a problem (conscious) and a growing fear (unconscious). This relationship is further suggested by the juxtaposition of the pristine outfit with the seemingly "wind-swept" or "bed-head" hair, a contrast that suggests the inner-turmoil may have moved outwardly. This panel can be read in isolation from the entire text; however, our understanding of this one image is enhanced by the events that occur prior to this scene, suggesting that context is as important in visual narrative/sequential art as it is in traditional print text.

Sometimes, an image tells a story without any words. The panel in Figure 2, from Hale, Hale, and Hale's *Rapunzel's Revenge*, shows the pain of a young Rapunzel as she is pulled from her mother. The expressions, posture, and position of the other characters show the unscrupulous nature of Gothel, the antagonist and villain of the story. The pain painted on the face of the presumed mother and daughter and the expression on Gothel's can create a cognitive response that may not be expressly conveyed or communicated with words. The central brightness of the image may indicate that both the mother and daughter are being pulled from their center, their happiness, and are moving into darkness. The sun effect generated by the light and the spark-like lines suggest the sharpness of the moment.

It should also be noted that both images (Figures 1 and 2) show universal emotional responses that any student, even readers struggling with English, can easily comprehend and process. The images can further develop students' conceptual knowledge of what abstract concepts, such as emotions, entail. Such knowledge can provide a basis from which students can visualize such moments in text without images.

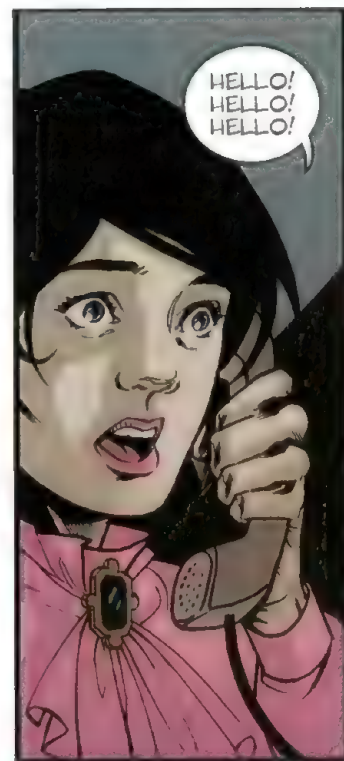


Figure 1, from *Twilight Zone: The After Hours* © Mark Kneece & Rebekah Isaacs, Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008



Figure 2, from *Rapunzel's Revenge* © Shannon Hale, Dean Hale, & Nathan Hale, Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008

WHY READ GRAPHIC NOVELS?

Many visual images tell stories. When one looks at a piece of visual art in a museum, such as the world of Frida Kahlo, he/she attempts to form a connection with the image, using language to form an understanding of the artwork which a) sets the image in context, b) analyzes the components of the image, and c) tries to unveil the narrative of the image. The artist conveys the narrative by relying on metaphoric images, lines, colors, patterns, and detail. Art, then, serves as a function and form of communication and is complimentary, though not an adjunct, to language. It helps the viewer/observer/participant to frame language-based responses. Humans typically express thoughts in the form of language, and students' responses to images, though perhaps cognitively silent, still help students utilize language (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986). The reader of art sees these details and explores how the author employs artistic devices to communicate his/her understandings, perceptions, emotions, or ideas, helping the voyeur to be exposed to new ways of envisioning the world and thereby increasing his/her knowledge (Arnheim, 2004).

In many cases, graphic novels use the same types of artistic devices. However, unlike traditional artists, the work of a graphic novelist or graphic illustrator moves from one canvas to multiple panels and pages of a book (McCloud, 1993). The details, though sometimes made miniscule by the number of panels and frames on a page, are still important to the story, and readers must be attuned to those details in order to fully integrate meaning between text and image. Like a traditional piece of literature in which authors choose their words carefully, the graphic novelist thinks critically about the color, line, form, shape, and detail as well as the language he/she uses. The story conveyed by a graphic novelist, then, is as intricate as a story told by a traditional author, regardless of the age group of the target audience.

It is important to note that understanding language is frequently framed by and developed in relationship with sensory connections to that language (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986). Individuals acquire language through interactions with other individuals as well as encounters with static media. Acquisition of language does not cease in childhood. Images continually support language development, and images, in turn, have a great impact on our cognition and understanding of other types of books. Images not only assist language development but become one of the ways we form understandings about what words and ideas mean. Through images we are capable of building the schema necessary for successful reading of multiple kinds of texts and documents. In other words, images frame understandings of language and help people learn to visualize and imagine.

Using images and illustrations, with or without words, is one of the many ways humans communicate. Humans are visual beings as well as oral-aural beings. We process our world not only through language, but also through viewing,

thus forming a deeper understanding of life and communication when our senses merge. Every aspect of reading, for a person with sight, is about viewing since we look at a page, view words, and process, comprehend, and evaluate the use of those words. Our increasing use of visual stimuli for different media, such as video games and websites, requires us to process, comprehend, and evaluate visual stimuli in combination with language. Graphic novels can help enhance students' visual literacy skills to deal with the increasing use of visual stimuli in today's world.

Whether graphic novels help readers to adjust their cognitive load or place more demands on our cognition remains to be researched; however, graphic novels do allow readers to more quickly visualize and track characters while monitoring their comprehension. Graphic novels do not foster a dependence on images. In fact, metacognitive awareness is necessary for successful reading of texts which require readers to synthesize between word and image.

ARE GRAPHIC NOVELS JUST FOR ADULTS?

Though many published graphic novels deal with mature themes and ideas that are appropriate for mature readers, such as Craig Thompson's *Blankets* and Charles Burns' *Black Hole*, a large number of authors and publishers are reaching younger audiences with well-written, developmentally-appropriate texts. Books like those of Mo Willems feature many comic conventions such as multiple panels and word/thought balloons, suggesting that younger readers become aware of the format and develop awareness of text structure. Graphic novels like *Owly*, *Robot Dreams*, and *Baby Mouse* are appropriate to use with younger readers. *Owly* is a wordless graphic novel for very young readers featuring a little owl who, throughout four books, assists other characters and makes new friends. Perfect for character education with young readers, this book focuses on motifs of friendship and respect. *Otto's Orange Day* is another graphic novel written for younger readers and helps promote imagination and creativity.

Books like *Laika*, *Rapunzel's Revenge*, and *The Twilight Zone* series are texts appropriate for middle school/junior high readers. Many of the themes embodied in these texts connect with adolescent development and maturation and connect with middle school language arts curricula. As an example, Nick Abadzis' *Laika* is a touching and powerful book that discusses the role and treatment of animals by examining the fictionalized life of the first dog launched into space. When literature focuses on exploring ethical treatment of animals, especially animals like dogs and cats – humans' companions – readers question the nature and role of humanity.

Senior high school readers can benefit from texts like *American-Born Chinese*, *Persepolis*, *Maus*, *The Plot*, and *Fallout*. Because these texts deal with more mature topics, like the Holocaust, the development of the nuclear bomb, war, bullying, and racism, these graphic novels have applications across disciplines. These books also help students to simultaneously utilize and acquire cultural knowledge, building their cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1988). In addition, graphic novels have cross-curricular connections beyond reading/English/language arts and visual art, including social studies (history, economics, human rights, anthropology, sociology, and psychology), science, health science, and math. A graphic novel, like *Dignifying Science: Stories about Women Scientists*, not only provides historical information about women in the field of science, but also provides information particular to different science disciplines. At the same time, students are acquiring vocabulary and developing and honing a variety of reading strategies, helping them to better comprehend text and ideas.

WHY DO KIDS LIKE SEQUENTIAL ART?

Sequential art may appear misleading to individuals who believe that books with images are not substantive. Though a cursory glance may suggest to some individuals that graphic novels are simple or simplistic, a large number of graphic novels, like comic books, deal with real-life issues. A more critical look at some graphic novels, like Gaiman's *The Sandman* series or *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, show that the form includes texts that are elabo-

rate and require critical reading. Vocabulary in graphic novels, though less dense, can be complex and educational. In comic books, as an example, students frequently encounter advanced vocabulary words when introduced to characters (Carter, 2007b).

Very young readers enjoy graphic novels for their accessible storylines, characters, colors, and easy-to-grasp themes and motifs. This is not to suggest that comics and graphic novels are simplistic or viewed by the majority of their audience as simplistic. In fact, these texts are frequently more challenging than traditionally printed texts, asking readers to negotiate between language and image and to create a link connecting the two. Comics and graphic novels may have appropriately leveled themes and increasingly difficult vocabulary depending on grade level. Yet readers may have an easier time with the graphic novel because the pictures make the surface plot approachable while providing a gentle nudge in the direction of the inner issues.

Graphic novels and comic books for older students frequently expose adolescents to the adult world, a world different than their immediate world. Middle school and high school readers feel a sense of identity and begin to navigate this seemingly foreign world of adults – a world of adult love, deception, respect and admiration, intrigue, satire, passion, politics, war, bonds of friendship, famine, genocide, and hope. As students look at these books as accessible (perhaps with some considering the texts simple, fun and familiar) they are also developing an awareness of what it means to be an adult.

WHY DO GRAPHIC NOVELS WORK?

Motivation for reading, or lack thereof, is an obstacle many teachers encounter in English/language arts classes throughout the nation. Students who have been disenfranchised with reading, for any number of reasons, are often reluctant readers. Though some of these students have deficiencies or difficulties with reading, some are also a-literate, that is, they can read but they often choose not to. Research in the field of literacy instruction (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2006; Cavazos-Kottke, 2005; Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007) tells us that students are reading in different mediums. They're just not reading what teachers want them to read. Validating the types of reading materials students read outside of school may reduce the number of a-literate readers in school and lead them to read other types of texts. It is, however, important to recognize the medium as literary as well as independent of other types of textual mediums and not use it solely for the purpose of moving readers to other texts.

Because graphic novels reduce the cognitive load for some struggling readers who have difficulty visualizing text, struggling readers who are typically overwhelmed by the volume of words in a text may be more willing to pick up a graphic novel and read, helping them to develop an appreciation for reading. If students feel successful as readers, they are more likely to continue reading and read other types of texts too.

Graphic novels typically work well with many different types of readers, especially young men (New Jersey Reading Association, 2007). Of course, authors and publishers have distributed a number of excellent graphic novels which work well with young women as well as both sexes. *The Twilight Zone* series captures the imagination and love for fantasy of both men and women. *Rapunzel's Revenge*, with a female protagonist, can appeal to female readers; however, the Western-esque atmosphere and setting of the book can draw in male readers as well.

Special needs learners can also benefit from the use of graphic novels. Selecting graphic novels that encourage students to articulate the story, such as wordless graphic novels, can help students pay attention to sequence and order as well as details. Graphic novels also help students develop skills related to visualization, a key facet of active reading. By looking at the text and the image together, students are able to monitor their comprehension, an obstacle when dense text may overwhelm these students with excessive cognitive load. Students who are autistic or

have difficulty understanding how language conveys emotion can readily see the expressions of characters and better comprehend emotions.

English language learners (see Cary, 2004) can also benefit from the use of graphic novels because many graphic novels introduce idioms, colloquialisms, and onomatopoeia. These texts can help students learn metaphoric language. Manga, Japanese-style graphic novels featuring illustrations similar to anime, typically have different concepts about print, opening from back-to-front and reading from right-to-left. Manga could be helpful for English language learners from many Middle Eastern countries and might help them more easily acquire reading skills in English.

Finally, advanced readers can benefit from the use of graphic novels. As discussed earlier, graphic novels are intricately designed, just like a piece of visual art or a traditional novel. Asking students to discuss the graphic novelist's use of lines and shapes to convey imagery, coloring and detail to convey tone and to discuss theme, character, and plot helps advanced readers continue to develop their reading habits, interests, and skills. Further, exposing advanced readers to graphic novels exposes them to different text structures and different forms of communication, helping them to see the world through various lenses.

WHAT CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE CLASSROOM?

Teaching graphic novels still requires that teachers practice good teaching. *Employing the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model* (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) can be beneficial when introducing students to graphic novels. Though some students will instantly understand how to read graphic novels, other students may experience difficulties. Modeling how to read a graphic novel is very helpful for students who struggle with these texts.

Graphic novels help students learn to speculate about images, an advantageous skill linked not only to imagination but also rhetoric. Students who learn to analyze images are capable of enhancing their skills of argumentation. Students learn to discuss elements of illustrations, images, and visual art in order to develop their opinions and points of argument.

To help students learn to analyze images, a teacher may want to use a classical piece of visual art, asking students to explain the narrative contained in the image. Students know how to form stories from images, but helping drawing out these stories can lead to rich conversations in the classroom.

When using classical visual images, teachers may want to question students by asking them to discuss the story conveyed through the image. Questions like (a) Can you explain how you arrived at that story? (b) Does this image represent beauty or ugliness? And (c) How might this image impact our understanding of beauty? help to frame students' critical reading of images. Though aesthetic appreciation is only aspect of analysis of visual images, teachers who use art to begin a conversation about visual images (such as cartoons and comics) help their students use language to explore values, interpretations, and aesthetics.

Asking students to reflect on how they achieved their understandings will also help them to develop metacognitive awareness. Of course, most traditional visual art is created in isolation and is not connected to any prior or future work of the artist. Sequential art depends upon prior events even though each panel may be read in isolation. However, an activity such as the one above helps students to cultivate their skills of viewing and forming hypotheses while using language to explain, clarify, and justify their opinions. It is their use of language, and their ability to think through their argument and provide a working rationale, that can help students to explore connotations of images

(such as, why is this a picture of beauty?) and to develop critical thinking skills.

After this first activity, a teacher may choose to take one panel from the selected graphic novel and ask the students similar questions. As an example, look at the panel in Figure 3 from *Twilight Zone: Walking Distance*:

What is the story in this panel? How do we know? Is there more to this story than we're aware of? How do we know?



Figure 3, from *Twilight Zone: Walking Distance* © Mark Kneece & Dove McHarque, Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008

Examining how authors develop graphic novels from panel to panel can also help them to understand character. Look at the panel in Figure 4 from *Twilight Zone: The After Hours*.

We know there is a story in this one panel, and that this one panel is interrupting a more flowing narrative of life. However, the story we see is slightly limited. What happens if we add a second panel, telling the story of this panel from a different perspective? Do we see the story the same way?

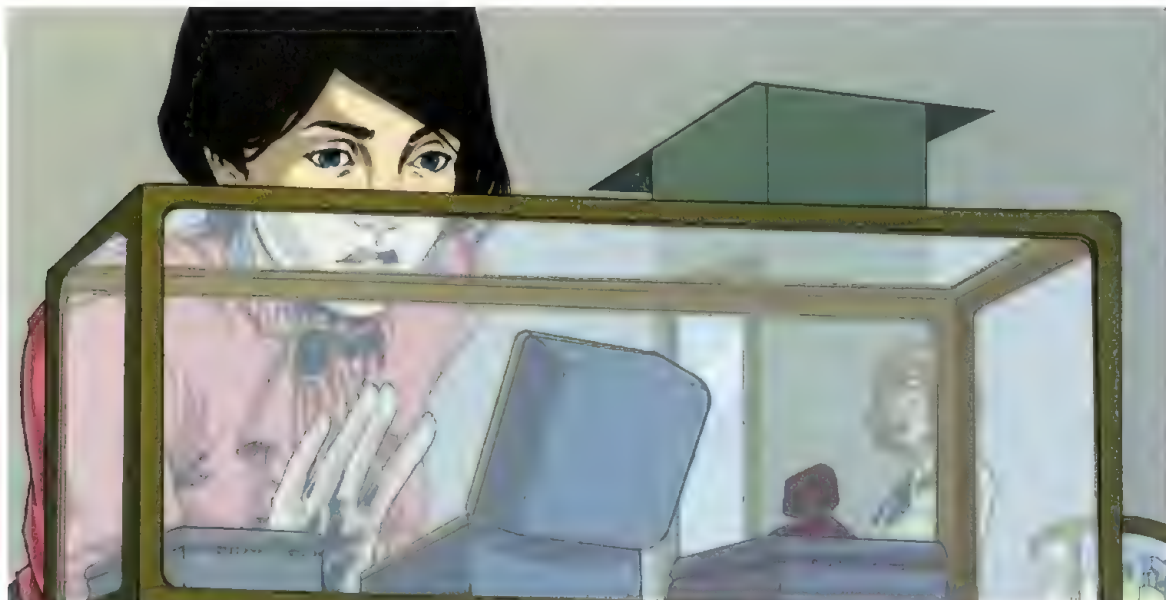


Figure 4, from *Twilight Zone: The After Hours* © Mark Kneece & Rebekah Isaacs, Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008

Have we learned anything new about the character, the setting, or the situation from the addition of a second panel? Teaching students to discuss color, shape, line, boundary, words, placement, and detail can help them to discuss character, plot, and setting in new ways. Let's take a look at the final panel from the same page.



Figure 5, from *Twilight Zone: The After Hours* © Mark Kneece & Rebekah Isaacs, Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008

The situation in the last panel shows a more detailed setting with multiple stories converging around the protagonist, Marsha. In isolation, moving from one panel to the next, even with no words used by the author, our understanding of context drastically changes. We begin to see fuller bodies, more elaborate details of clothing, and a greater amount of detail for setting.



Figure 6, from *Twilight Zone: The After Hours* © Mark Kneece & Rebekah Isaacs, Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008

Let's examine the full page, shown in Figure 8, as it was published. Note that the second panel overlaps the first and last panels. Does this indicate that the second panel, by location and overlap of the other two panels, has a more central role in forming our understanding of the text and the character? Asking the students to engage in these discussions helps them to develop an appreciation for visual communication, but also helps them to foster critical



Figure 7, from *Twilight Zone: The After Hours* © Mark Kneece & Rebekah Isaacs, Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008

thinking skills. In many ways, questions we ask about framing or positioning of panels are very similar to questions we ask students about syntax and its importance to meaning-making.



Figure 8, from *Rapunzel's Revenge* © Shannon Hale, Dean Hale, & Nathan Hale, Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008

Finally, before the class reads a graphic novel as a whole group, a teacher may choose to work on a series of panels.



Figure 9, from *Rapunzel's Revenge* © Shannon Hale, Dean Hale, & Nathan Hale, Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008

Ask the students to explain the story contained in the eight panels contained in Figures 8 and 9. Ask them to describe what they learned about the character. Then ask them to explore the details in those panels. Why does the illustrator include four Rapunzels in panel one? What is the significance of the leaves or the carvings? What does the illustrator convey by the holes in the tree? In panel eight, why does the illustrator provide a “bird’s-eye” view? Also, encourage them to develop their own questions. Again, we are promoting language by asking students to express, through words, their responses to visual images, helping them to continue to develop cognitive skills which will impact reading performance and achievement.

Each of the techniques described above helps students connect the visual text with the printed text. Our goal is to move students from a single image to multiple panels, helping them to understand that graphic novels build panel by panel. By beginning with a single piece of visual art (modeling and sharing), we teach students to discuss one specific image, helping students who are learning the process of analyzing images focus in and hone those skills. We also help them to acquire the language of visual analysis by demonstrating not only meaning but also application. Moving from a work of visual art to a single panel from a graphic novel helps a student recognize how tools of visual analysis carry from one medium to another. Here, again, we model and share, helping students to practice these skills. Asking students to slowly piece their interpretations of single panels together helps them practice the skills necessary for integrating multiple image-text relationships. By asking our students to interpret graphic novel panels and piece those interpretations together, we guide our students to complete a task necessary for successful reading of sequential art – the task of integration. Our final step allows the students to work independently or in small groups to practice the skill of interpretation and integration.

In some cases, students learn that the image tells the story without words, helping students to understand that they need to pay attention to each panel. In other cases, students have to be certain they match word with image and recognize how the two operate together. Though this frequently happens quickly and, perhaps unconsciously, in our discussions with students, we want them to think about the strategies they use to comprehend the text. As such, our walk-through helps students become aware of the steps involved in reading a graphic novel, helping students who may struggle with this medium find a successful formula for reading text structure.

At the lower grades, teachers can still work with students on the development of concepts about print. Most graphic novels have the same concepts about print as traditional picture books. There is a progression of front-to-back, left-to-right, top-to-bottom. Since concepts about print are central to reading, even (or especially) for manga ensuring that students have appropriate abilities to move from panels and to even hold the book and flip pages should not be undervalued. .

Young students also typically rely on the illustrations in picture books to read a story. They might open a book which parents/guardians have read to them before and begin play-reading. This is an important step in the development of reading. Their readings typically feature elements of conflict, character, and plot and show the burgeoning awareness of narrative. Providing wordless graphic novels, such as *Owly*, can help inspire students’ creativity and can help them practice with story structure while also encouraging them to explore the link between language and thought.

DO ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES STILL MATTER?

Yes. Teaching students to engage in activities that help them function as active readers is still important when working with graphic novels. In fact, any lesson on graphic novels should emphasize or include instruction on text structure.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

are also still important for reading, regardless of grade level.

PICTURE WALK:

Asking students to complete a picture walk through a graphic novel, even at the high school level, can help students to activate their schema or prior knowledge.

PRE-READING DISCUSSION:

Talking about the title, the cover, and the blurbs on the back of the book also help students to access prior knowledge.

ANTICIPATION GUIDE:

Anticipation guides (which would be especially useful for nonfiction or informational graphic novels) help teachers to monitor their students' prior knowledge.

ESTABLISHING A PURPOSE FOR READING:

After accessing prior knowledge, helping students to develop a purpose for reading (by using a graphic organizer such as a K-W-L Chart [Ogle, 1986, 1989] for nonfiction or information text) encourages students to stay focused and actively read.

PRE-TEACHING IMPORTANT VOCABULARY WORDS:

Like traditional books, graphic novels may feature difficult vocabulary words. Pre-teaching key vocabulary words can help students be successful with reading.

DURING READING ACTIVITIES

help students to monitor their comprehension.

READING JOURNALS:

Asking students to complete reading journals while they read teaches them skills for note-taking. Reading journals could be composed in dialogue journal entry formats or could ask students to jot down answers to specific questions. Reading journals also help students prepare for discussions about the graphic novel by asking them to record key ideas, personal reflections, quotes, questions, or points for discussion.

SKETCH RESPONSES:

Students can also sketch reactions to the book, helping them to practice interpreting the text or conveying ideas by creating images.

ANNOTATION:

Annotating the graphic novel (point out key ideas or literary elements) helps students to engage the text actively. They can pose questions to the author in their annotations, helping them to question why the graphic novelist employed certain techniques or pointing out discrepancies in the text. Annotation, though typically done on the pages of the book itself, can also be accomplished with post-it notes.

QUESTIONING:

By developing questions about the graphic novel as they are reading, students stay active in the reading process. These questions can be about character, plot, technique, etc. Students can also write down questions about ideas or concepts for which they need clarity. Asking students to compose three types of questions (literal [i.e., what happens], analytical [i.e., author technique],

or global [i.e., connections to self, other books, or world events]) helps students to think about the novel more critically.

CONNECTING:

Forming connections with characters, events, or scenarios while reading helps students to not only actively read the text, but to also critically respond to the text. Text-to-Self, Text-to-Text, and Text-to-World Connections can all be recorded in their reading journals.

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

help students engage the book with peers or the whole class.

CONFERENCING:

In classrooms in which students practice Reader-Response (Rosenblatt, 1965), conferences can help teachers to monitor comprehension. After reading, a teacher can ask students to explain their response to the text as well as ask how he/she achieved that response and can intervene when students demonstrate difficulties with comprehension.

DISCUSSION:

Asking students to discuss their responses to the text helps them to participate in communal discussion. By utilizing discussion groups, literature circles (Daniels, 1994), or Socratic seminars, teachers help students to negotiate meaning about a text. After working with a peer or small group, engaging students in whole class discussions helps the class to discuss the theme of a graphic novel, characters, plot, author technique, etc. Students can use their reading journals to ask questions, discuss connections, or raise points for discussion.

COMPLETING GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS:

Graphic organizers such as the Venn Diagram (for comparisons), a T-Chart (for cause-and-effect or problem-solution), the K-W-L chart (Ogle, 1986), or the Comprehension Windows Strategy [Bass & Woo, 2008] for nonfiction or informational text can help teachers monitor student understanding after reading.

CREATING:

When students create based on what they read, they are not only demonstrating that they comprehend the text, they are also reflecting on their comprehension. Asking students to create stories from other characters' points-of-view, especially as a graphic novel, can help students think about the process of writing. Utilizing the writing process and Writer's Workshop helps students to learn the stages of writing and the process for publication, helping them to see that writing takes time. This will also help students respect how authors, especially graphic novelists, create books. These works could then become classroom books which can be used for reading lessons. As an example, students can use the genre of Rapunzel's Revenge (a fractured fairy tale) to write their own graphic novel about a fractured fairy tale.

RETELLINGS & ASSESSMENTS:

Retellings of a completed chapter, story, or novel, even with a graphic novel, help teachers to monitor student comprehension. Assessments such as tests and quizzes, if appropriately designed, can also help assess comprehension. Assessment of comprehension also occurs in conferences or discussions or by examining reading journals, annotations, or graphic organizers.

NOTE: With a lengthy graphic novel, a teacher may repeat the pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading activities based on their students' needs.

CAN WE EXTEND GRAPHIC NOVELS TO PROMOTE CRITICAL LITERACY?

Some graphic novels are excellent tools for continuing student learning beyond the classroom. Non-fiction and informational graphic novels like *Persepolis*, *Maus*, and *Safe-Area Gorazde* can be quite helpful in extending student learning. Teachers also recognize that, especially with controversial or political non-fiction texts, it is important to introduce students to multiple perspectives to an issue. As such, it is strongly encouraged that teachers pair controversial works with other texts offering differing opinions of the same issue.

Engaging students with fictional graphic novels, like *American-Born Chinese*, can encourage students' critical thinking and help them develop projects which focus on stereotypes, bullying, and adolescent angst. Some graphic novels help students think about socio-cultural or sociopolitical issues in new ways, and many students may actually be moved to action to improve situations when confronted with these issues through engaging books.

CAN GRAPHIC NOVELS WORK FOR GUIDANCE COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL WORKERS?

Some graphic novels, like some traditional books, may work wonders for art therapy and bibliotherapy. Counselors and social workers can provide students with graphic novels which can help students to work through trauma or which have characters in similar situations. Also, there are some graphic novels which deal with issues like bullying, gay/lesbian identity, HIV/AIDS awareness, child abuse, sexual assault, peer pressure, or even anxiety about school, such as *Pedro & Me*, *The Amazing True Story of a Single Teenage Mom*, and *The Tale of One Bad Rat*. Having these books readily available in a guidance office library (with staff members trained to help students) may be just what some students need. (Again, it is important to read these books and be aware of the content.)

Creating graphic novels can also help students to reflect on their community, their personal lives, and their ideas about the world. The Comic Book Project out of Teachers College of Columbia (Bitz, 2004a, 2004b) has engaged urban and inner-city school students in such activities. Sample comic books created by these students can be seen at: www.comicbookproject.org.

WHAT ROLE DOES THE SCHOOL LIBRARY/MEDIA CENTER PLAY?

School libraries and media centers have a responsibility to provide materials to students that excite their reading interests, validate their reading interests, and help students to think inwardly and outwardly. Not all of the books contained in a school library/media center would be appropriate for use in the curriculum because not every book has connections to the materials students need to learn. Graphic novels are no different. Some graphic novels are written to inspire students or to make students laugh, but they might not have a purpose in the classroom. However, school libraries/media centers should have a larger collection of graphic novels available as they are books students will check out. Some books contained in the school library or media center might deal with social issues not appropriate for the classroom.

HOW DO GRAPHIC NOVELS FIT INTO MY CLASSROOM LIBRARY?

Graphic novels can be stored in the classroom library just like in the school library/media center. Some of the books contained in the school library/media center might be good for social issues or adolescent development, but may

not be appropriate in a classroom library. However, stocking books in your classroom library for students to borrow, especially during sustained silent reading (SSR) or 100-Book Challenge, may encourage student reading and may motivate students to read.

HOW DO I KNOW IF GRAPHIC NOVELS ARE APPROPRIATE?

As with any other curriculum material, whether a traditional novel or a textbook, teachers need to ensure that the graphic novels they select are appropriate for school. As with traditional books, not every graphic novel a teacher comes across will be of interest to students, nor is every book appropriate for classroom use. Before choosing to use a graphic novel in the curriculum, either in language arts or another discipline, teachers and/or curriculum supervisors first need to read the novel thoroughly. It is also important that teachers think about their school community as well as the community in which their students live. Also, though a graphic novel worked with one grade level group of students the previous year, it is important to think about the development and maturity levels of current students when selecting a graphic novel. In most schools, these procedures are also used when selecting novels to integrate into the curricula, so teachers and curriculum supervisors are familiar with this process.

When selecting a graphic novel, as with other pieces of literature, it is important to think about the purpose of the text.

- Why are you using this graphic novel?
- Is the graphic novel supplemental to another text, or is it a classroom text?
- How does the graphic novel fit into the curriculum?
- Is there a benefit to using this graphic novel instead of another text?
- Who are the students you are working with, and are they developmentally ready?
- Is the graphic novel used for independent reading, buddy reading, shared reading, small group reading, or whole class instruction?

That said, there are a large volume of graphic novels available, many of which are developmentally-appropriate for a wide-range of students. Though one graphic novel might not work, another may work.

Teachers should take special care with manga, Japanese graphic novels. Japan is culturally different from the United States, so discussion of sexuality or depiction of nudity or partial nudity may exist in manga. As stated, teachers should always be careful to read fully any book, including manga and graphic novels, prior to incorporating them into the classroom or curriculum. This is not to say that sensitive issues should warrant censoring a book. To the contrary, awareness of sensitive issues allows a teacher to adequately prepare for questions or concerns and to prepare appropriate defenses of the books. Educators may want to visit <http://www.graphicnovelreporter.com/content/tools-you-can-use-resources> for more information about the types of manga which are produced.

HOW DO I KEEP UP-TO-DATE ON THE LATEST GRAPHIC NOVELS?

The School Library Journal regularly features recent releases of graphic novels as well as reviews. Publications by the National Council of Teachers of English (English Journal and Language Arts) sometimes feature articles on graphic novels and their use in the classroom. Publications by the International Reading Association (The Reading Teacher and Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy) sometimes publish research articles on the efficacy of using graphic novels in the classroom. Subscribing to publishers' newsletters and catalogs can also help you stay up-to-date on recent and forthcoming publications. The IRA also has a Special Interest Group on Science Fiction, Fantasy, and

Graphic Novels which publishes a seasonal newsletter titled Alternate Realities in which members publish reviews of or articles about graphic novels. Membership to the SIG is open to any member of the IRA. You can also contact your school library media specialist, public youth service librarian, or your local book or comic book store for assistance in identifying new titles. Your students are also likely to be very knowledgeable about new titles.

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WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS FOR REVIEWING DRAFT VERSIONS AND PROVIDING COMMENTARY, INSIGHT, AND SUGGESTIONS:

James Bucky Carter, Ph.D., University of Texas, El Paso
Gene Luen Yang, author, *American Born Chinese*
Gina Gagliano, FirstSecond, Inc.
Beth Eller, Bloomsbury USA/Walker Books for Children

This paper is an official position paper of the Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Graphic Novels Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association and the Executive Board of the New Jersey Reading Association as well as the Legislative and Professional Standards Committee of the NJRA.

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